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THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

BY
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THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

A BOAT AMONG THE BREAKERS

THOUGH it does not seem necessary to mention here that village beside the sea wherewith this narrative is mainly concerned, it may be frankly confessed that it is an actual place and at no very considerable distance from the great metropolis of New York.

Very real, too, were the four boys who, despite various differences in their upbringing and surroundings, had during the summer of that particular year become fast friends. Ben Masterson, the oldest, was tall and heavily built, his tall and muscular frame well inured to hardship, his tanned, almost leathern, complexion proclaimed that he was a resident of the place and followed the sea as his principal calling. Like many another of his type, he was slow and taciturn of

speech, and his thoughts were tardy in formulating themselves.

Paddy Wallace, the youngest of the lads, was likewise a native, and, having early lost his parents, had led somewhat of a vagabond existence. He was quick and lively in imagination, and his natural intelligence was just being developed by the first rudiments of education.

Between these two, in point of age, came Harry and Fred Tremaine; and, as their appearance at once suggested, they were merely summer residents and the sons of a wealthy father. In character and disposition the brothers were markedly dissimilar to each other. Fred was wiry, thin, and dark, of a restless, nervous temperament, perpetually in action and scarcely giving himself time to think. Harry, on the contrary, was tall and fair, with large, wide-open, blue eyes, and was of a thoughtful and reflective turn of mind. His ideas were very often quicker than his acts and he was very frequently the spokesman of the party.

It may be further premised that the Tremaines inhabited a handsome summer villa

situated at a short distance up from the shore. Their father and mother had gone to travel abroad that summer and had left them in care of their former nurse, Hannah, now the housekeeper, with the occasional supervision of an uncle, who came down from the city two or three times a week just to assure himself that all was well with his nephews.

Upon the particular morning when this story opens the ocean was of a deep aquamarine blue reflected from the cloudless sky above, while the beach, in contrast, stretched white and broad and smooth upward from the water. The incoming tide sent its wavelets, ever increasing, until they should later reach a mountainous height. Though the hour was very early, the boys were already upon the shore, where Fred and his brother Harry were hard at work digging a tunnel in the sand. Ben and Paddy stood near, watching that operation with interest, though taking no part in its progress. Their lives had been too strenuous for them to waste their energies in so futile a construction, which the first big wave would ruth-

lessly demolish. Such futility, as they readily granted, however, was excusable in boys who had only come to the seashore for the summer, and who were fresh from college.

Fred pursued the occupation with an anxious, worried expression upon his countenance, as if it were really an important undertaking. He had already dug his way deep down, forming an excavation. Harry, on the contrary, removed the sand from deliberately planned passages, arranging it in neat piles, which he flattened into shape with his shovel, producing smooth hillocks. Fred sent the same sand flying furiously in every direction and dug and dug, as if precious moments were speeding, and he was digging a path to freedom from a dungeon.

"Golly, but you kin dig fast!" cried Paddy, who had been watching his friend's progress with admiring eyes. "I wish I could dig as fast, up there to Brown's." He pointed as he spoke to a large dwelling on the cliff, "Kase I gits paid by what I does."

"Do you?" asked Fred, momentarily suspending his arduous labors; "how much do you get?"

"Well, if I does a good day's work, my wages mounts up to three or four dollars."

"That's not much," declared Fred, pursuing his suspended operations.

"He means that he and I get more for doing nothing," explained Harry, laughing and placidly smoothing one of his heaps. At that instant Fred sent up such a cloud of sand from the pit that his brother remonstrated:

"Look here!" cried he, "you stop that! You're getting my clothes all over sand!"

"Your *clothes!*" repeated Fred, scornfully, "as if any fellow cares about his clothes."

"Well, you stop, anyway!" retorted Harry, "I'll get some of that stuff in my eye first thing you know, and if I do, I'll fill up that hole and throw the sand in on top of you."

"I'd like to see you," growled Fred from the depths, "and I'm not going to stop digging till I get this thing done."

He sent his fierce shovelfuls, however, prudently in another direction after that, for he knew by experience that once his

mild-mannered brother's temper was up, he might be dangerous. He continued, nevertheless, to grumble as he worked.

"At the pace you're going, the tide will be in before we finish."

"Well, if it does come in," Harry answered philosophically, "none of us will sleep any the worse to-night."

Fred, seeing that argument was useless, devoted all his energies to his task.

Ben sat meanwhile upon an old boat that had been stranded and half buried in the sand. He watched the two at work, listening to the contest between them with a half smile on his somewhat heavy face. Gradually, however, as the tunnel proceeded toward completion and the tide, crawling and licking the sandy beach and depositing thereon feathery ridges of foam, crept up nearer and nearer to the fortification, Ben's thoughts wandered and followed his eyes outward over the wastes of sea. The gulls were flying upward with a rapid, joyous movement, betokening fine weather; the waves were leaping and dancing; and the fresh salt breeze was blowing landward. As

Ben gazed, his eyes took on a keener expression and raising his hand he shielded his eyes that he might see the farther. Then he said:

"Paddy, look out yonder!"

Paddy looked and uttered an exclamation:

"Cricky, Ben!" he cried, "it's a boat, a catboat, I guess, and what —"

He said no more, but ran with a quick, instinctive movement down to the water's edge.

"It's bottom upward!" he cried, "that's what it is."

"By Jingo!" was all Ben said, as he strode after his friend. By mutual consent, they seemed to ignore the city boys, who could not be expected to know anything of such an emergency.

"There's some one on her," announced Ben, making a telescope of his hands.

"What? Where?" cried Fred, unwilling to be so ignored and leaping out of the pit, which was now up to his shoulders. By his impetuous movements, he overthrew several hillocks which Harry had carefully upraised.

"You great loon!" explained Harry, irately, "can't you look where you're going!"

But Fred was already standing beside the two at the water's edge, straining his near-sighted eyes this way and that over the waste of waters to catch sight of the object which had attracted his companions.

Harry placidly continued, at first, to rearrange his hillocks, putting them into order with careful touch. Presently, however, he too deserted the tunnel and rose to join his friends, as fragments of disjointed talk reached him.

"It is a boat."

"No, I guess it's a porpoise."

"No, there she goes!"

"The tide'll take her out."

"No, it won't neither, the tide's comin' in."

"But thar's the undertow," declared Ben thoughtfully.

"Did you say there was a man on the boat?" asked Fred excitedly.

"I ain't sure," answered Ben, "though it looks that way."

Paddy began an excited hopping about from one foot to another, venturing his bare

feet as far as possible into the water, as though he could annihilate distance and discover the actual truth. Harry opened his blue eyes wide and fixed them upon the face of Ben, having great confidence in the latter's judgment concerning things nautical.

"What do you think will happen?" he questioned, breathlessly.

Ben turned and looked curiously at his companion as he said:

"Why, thar's jest one thing that's sure to happen. Ef there's a man out there in the surf, he'll get drowned."

"Oh," cried Harry, "can't we do anything?"

But even Fred's feverish activity and Paddy's impulsive movements were equally in vain. Breathlessly and nervously the Tremaines, at least, waited for Ben's answer to Harry's question.

"Ef I could be sartain there was a man out there, I'd —"

"Look, Ben, look!" cried Paddy, breathlessly, "there *is* a man and he's putting up a signal!"

The two pairs of trained eyes saw what

was at first invisible to the others—a stick hoisted, upon which waved a flag, or a red handkerchief.

“I know what to do now!” exclaimed Ben.
“Come on, Paddy!”

“Where are you going, Ben?” inquired Fred, following so quickly upon his footsteps as to outstrip the heavier lad, and consequently having to dance backward in front of him. Paddy ran straight on, knowing what Ben had in mind. Harry hesitated for a few moments, and by a sort of subconsciousness, distinct from the keen anxiety that possessed him, he cast one regretful glance toward the nearly completed tunnel. But he could not keep still in the presence of that tempting speck upon the surface of the ocean. He wanted to know what was going on and to help if it were possible in whatever project Ben might have in mind for the relief of that imperiled fellow-creature.

“What are you going to do, Ben?” Fred inquired again.

“I’m going to collect the men,” Ben answered, panting a little from the pace at

which he was running, "for we've got to launch the life-boat."

CHAPTER II

THE LIFE-SAVERS

THE sound of that word was magical to the city boys. It recalled so many thrilling stories of shipwreck and deadly peril, of hidden reefs, sunken rocks, human waifs tossed on the treacherous element, and more than knightly heroism. It filled them, too, with a kind of awe, for here under the bright arch of heaven, on an ordinary morning and in these familiar places, a possible tragedy was to be enacted. And it was this tragedy which brave men were about to risk their lives to prevent.

"Look here!" cried Harry, panting after the others, for he disliked haste, though his thoughts, at least, had been working to good purpose. "Let us separate at the boardwalk and each take a road. We'll get the men together quicker."

"By Jingo, you're right!" returned Ben.

"Well, give us each the name of some of the crew, and let us start."

"We'll want a dozen or maybe more," decided Ben, running over the matter in his mind, "it's a big boat and there's a strong sea on."

"I'm a fast runner, give me six," exclaimed Fred. He got them—Welch and the two Morgans, and Dolan and Smith and Curran—and he was off like a deer, leaving the beach and bounding over the fences in a cross-country route that he had marked out for himself.

"Give me some of the nearest, as I'm slow," Harry suggested, and Ben gave him two. Three more were intrusted to Paddy, who was also swift of foot.

"That leaves jest one for me," Ben concluded. "It's Wells that's got the key to the boat-house."

He pointed as he spoke to a familiar but unsightly structure of gray, unpainted wood which occupied a space where the boardwalk went up from the beach.

"Him and me," Ben explained, "can be

gettin' things in order while the others are comin'."

This being settled, Paddy and Harry set off in different directions, each going as speedily as he could. Harry always remembered as he ran the scent of the sweet-briar bush, which grew solitary by the roadside and against which he stumbled and fell, for he was not a good runner. Up he got again and hastened on, casting one glance backward toward that speck on the vast expanse of water. It did not seem as if that broad and sunlit surface could be cruel and treacherous. If it had been dark and troubled from an overcast sky, he would have realized the man's peril so much the more acutely. As it was, however, he was the only one of the boys who thought of sending up a prayer for the safety of the unfortunate while he sped upon his mission. Fred, at least, would have done so, and probably Paddy, had they given themselves time to think.

It did not take so very long to assemble the men that were needed—resolute, strong, and brave, and accustomed to wrestle with the sea. A great many others arrived upon

the scene; in fact, the sands were soon swarming with human life. Men, women, and children assembled there in excited throngs—residents of the village and still more the transient dwellers in hotels or cottages, who were glad of a sensation to break the languid monotony of their summer existence. All eyes were turned and many powerful glasses leveled upon that distant object, far out at the mercy of the treacherous waves. By the glasses it could be clearly perceived that the boat was indeed bottom upward, that a human being was keeping a precarious position upon its slippery surface and that he had contrived to hoist a signal in the form of a handkerchief fastened to a stick. At any moment, as the initiated were aware, the frail bark might be sucked downward by the terrible undertow. It was a fearful situation for a fellow-creature under the sky of heaven, as even the most careless realized.

The Tremaine boys and Paddy Wallace, having fulfilled their respective tasks, hurried back to the beach and mingled with the throng of spectators. They were easily

among the most eager and excited persons there. They divided their attention between the hapless object of universal interest and the boat-house, whose doors yawned wide, disclosing therein Ben Masterson deftly and silently assisting the older men. The necessary preparations were, in fact, being carried on with the utmost promptness and despatch and in almost absolute silence

The chief delay was in the transport of the boat's huge bulk to the beach. Horses had to be procured, being eagerly offered by villagers and summer residents alike. They were harnessed to a huge truck on which the life-boat was laid with great hoisting and strenuous effort of numerous brawny arms. When the horses, laboring in the heavy sand, dragged forth that ark of safety, a cheer went up from the multitude upon the beach. On and on went the horses, plowing their way, almost ankle deep, through the soft substance beneath their feet. With evident relief, they reached, at last, the firmer, smoother surface near the water's edge and drove along with renewed vigor, finally

reaching that point where the boat was to be launched.

Who that stood there on that bright morning, under that unclouded sky, with the sea-birds circling and wheeling overhead, and the porpoises tossing far out on the horizon, could forget the wild thrill of excitement, hope, and fear of which he was conscious at that supreme moment! Some two score or more strong men united in that final effort, a vigorous, prolonged push, which sent the life-boat splashing and foaming into the midst of the waves. They had arisen now with the incoming tide, which was almost at the full, to an immense height, and they broke with a muffled roar, rushing far up on the beach.

As the boat struck the water, cheer upon cheer broke forth and rose upward once more, echoing and re-echoing. Perhaps it reached the forlorn wretch tossing upon the miserable planks which separated him from eternity.

Harry Tremaine's blue eyes were full of tears, as with Fred and Paddy he vociferously joined in that cry of triumph. Neither

of the two latter could keep still an instant. They ran to and fro, uttering excited exclamations, and once Fred narrowly escaped falling into the pit which he had himself dug. The incoming tide had now reached it and had filled it to the top with water, which likewise flooded the passages and gradually washed away the barriers between them. This was the very result upon which the boys had counted, and yet as Harry's strong arm drew his brother back from the edge of that pitfall, there seemed something awful in the circumstance. Nor could they realize that they had been so lately busied about so trivial a matter. Thus do the trivialities of life forever appear in the presence of its grave emergencies.

As many as were required of the best and the strongest and the bravest men that the village could afford composed the crew. And it was a compliment to Ben, of which his companions were proud, that he should have been given a place among them. They took their places silently, baring their arms, whereon the veins stood out like whipcords, and preparing to wrestle with that fierce,

overmastering element. It was a tremendous task to encounter that surf, rising mountain high, breaking thunderously and encircling them and their craft in showers of feathery foam. It seemed inevitable that the vessel must be swallowed up and dashed to pieces against the shore, since the tide surging strongly inward seemed absolutely dead against the attempts they were making. It appeared a hopeless thing to extend any help to that human waif out there in his isolation.

No one knew who he was. So far as could be ascertained, none of the villagers or the summer visitors were missing, yet the crowd in its entirety hung upon the chance of his rescue. It was a curious thing that no sooner had the boat set out, with its gallant crew strenuously accepting those fearful odds and straining every muscle in the effort they were making, than the multitude upon the beach became convinced that the man was hopelessly doomed and that the life-boat could never by any possibility reach him in time.

Those who watched through the glasses held their breath, for every instant they ex-

pected to see the man engulfed. They saw the waves ever and anon seize the frail shell to which he clung and hurry it shoreward, and at such moments they fancied they could descry the white, agonized face of the unfortunate seafarer. But even as they looked a receding wave or some powerful current seized and carried the boat outwards again, almost beyond their range of vision. Those who had no glasses strained their eyes, but with very little result, perceiving only the moving speck and the surface of the sea. For many moments not a word was spoken; the hush in so far as human feelings were concerned was intense, while the life-boat danced upon the waves or was buried in the trough of the sea, and the spectators waited in an almost intolerable suspense.

CHAPTER III

A SOLEMN SCENE

AMONG the latest to arrive upon the beach was the parish priest, Father McNeirny. He had been absent on a sick-call

when the news of the overturned boat had first spread through the village. He was greeted on all sides with respectful friendliness and even cordiality, not only by those of his flock, but by the outsiders as well. They knew the value of his work to the village, where he was the first resident priest. His untiring activity, self-sacrifice, and unostentatious kindness were known to every one; and in moments of trouble and uncertainty the sight of his tall, well-knit figure and strong but kindly countenance was always welcome. He was greeted tumultuously by the Tremaine boys and Paddy. Fred began to tell him—so quickly that his words were jumbled oddly together—of everything that had transpired, and Harry put in a few quiet explanatory phrases, which were far more intelligible to the newcomer.

Being thus informed, Father McNeirny stood with the rest and watched the progress of the life-boat. It was a fine sight, wrestling with the big waves and making its way resolutely toward that still distant goal. There came a moment, however, of awful

terror and suspense for the watchers, when the man upon the overturned boat seemed to have disappeared under a huge, engulfing wave. It was believed that either his boat had sunk from under him or that he had been washed away, which was the more terrible since the life-boat was within comparatively easy distance of the spot.

"Oh, Father McNeirny, isn't it awful?" cried Harry, turning imploring eyes upon the priest, as if he could have commanded wind and wave by the very power of his ministry.

But the priest, absorbed in some engrossing thought, paid no heed to the boy. He advanced instead toward the water, with his eyes still fixed upon the fateful spot, followed by the awe-stricken boys. Many a glance besides that of Harry was turned upon the pastor. Somehow it seemed as if he might avert the disaster.

Pausing, at length, at the water's edge, Father McNeirny said, as one thinking aloud:

"I shall delay no longer. I'll give him conditional absolution, whoever he may be."

“God bless you and do, Father,” cried an old woman, from whose aged eyes tears were streaming.

Every one waited respectfully. Even Protestants or other outsiders who had no hold whatever upon Christianity regarded him curiously. They drew a kind of comfort from the mysterious power which, as it was quietly whispered around, he was about to exert over that human soul which might be even then slipping from its bonds and losing its hold upon earthly life. The priest had with him the stole which he had but lately worn when administering the Sacraments to a dying person in the calm obscurity of a little inland village. He put this about his neck and knelt a moment in prayer, and the Catholics—of whom there were many present—knelt likewise, while others raised their hats or bent the knee, sympathetically. Fred and Harry afterward declared that they had never prayed so hard in their lives as then. After that slight pause the priest arose and said in a clear, distinct voice:

“By the power which the Church confers upon her ministers, the power derived from

Christ, I am about to give this man conditional absolution."

There was a dead silence, broken only by a giant wave breaking upon the shore. The priest raised his hand and every one present, forgetting all controversial differences, was impressed by the tremendous power of the act.

"I absolve you," he said in Latin, "from all sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." To which he added: "May the Almighty God have mercy on you and forgive you your sins and bring you to life everlasting. Amen."

A kind of peace and quietness fell over the scene with the performance of that holy act. Women and even strong men, overcome by the solemnity of the occasion, wept audibly, while the priest, sinking once more upon his knees, prayed aloud and begged the people to pray for the rescue of the unhappy being thus buffeted by the waves or for the salvation of his soul. The air seemed to vibrate with those burning words of supplication wherein people of all creeds or of none felt impelled to join. It used to be

said long afterwards in the village that the whole incident was better than twenty sermons and it brought back more than one stray sheep to the fold. It showed the relative values, the little space which divides time from eternity and made every one realize, with a strange new force, the almost infinite power of the priesthood.

The strained pause, disturbed only by the thunderous boom of the surf, was broken at length by a triumphant cry of gladness and exultation. For to the holders of glasses, the distant boat, to which clung that forlorn waif of humanity, became once more visible. Fred and Harry stood close together, the former clutching his brother in a nervous grip. Paddy was beside them, half crying, half praying in his own simple fashion. When the suspense was momentarily relieved he took off his ragged cap and swung it over his head in glee, while Fred seized his unoccupied hand and, drawing Harry into the circle, performed a waltz of delight.

Father McNeirny, however, and the elders with whom he conversed, felt that any-

thing like rejoicing was premature. For almost every one of them had known awful instances where seafarers in deadly peril had perished at the very moment when help was at hand.

The life-boat, meanwhile, unaware of the solemn occurrence upon the shore, pursued its way, the rowers bending to their oars with Herculean effort and desperate determination. Each man of them felt that he must bring every muscle into play and exert every atom of strength which he possessed, to reach that moving speck. The waters about them changed from clear sea-green to a deep reflection of the sky, and the sun shot its arrows of gold into their depths and played upon the crest of the billows. But the stern rowers, bronzed and weather-beaten, heeded none of these things, nor yet the graceful upward flight of the gulls. There were graybeards amongst the crew who had been wrestlers with the sea from youth upwards, one or two were mere boys like Ben Masterson, but all worked together with resolute unity of purpose. Sometimes, indeed, their own position seemed sufficiently

perilous, as one giant wave after another broke over their boat and almost submerged the brave rescuers, and as they drew nearer their goal, the difficulties appeared momentarily to increase.

The crowds upon the beach, relapsing from their transient joyfulness of relief, waited with strained eyes and bated breath, fearing that any moment the shipwrecked man might disappear beneath the waves, and trembling even for the safety of the party of succor. For some upon that beach had sons or husbands or fathers amongst the crew, and the vicissitudes of the life-boat kept them in an agony of fear.

At last, by one supreme effort, the race was run, the gallant life-boat had attained its object, a human life was saved. A curious sight was witnessed then upon the shore. While cheer after cheer rent the air, ringing, tumultuous, vibrant with pent-up emotion, men clasped hands in strong pressure, and women hugged each other, some laughing, some crying. It showed the intrinsic good of human nature that such delight should reign supreme amongst so motley an as-

semblage of all classes and conditions because the deliverance of that one fellow-creature from the jaws of death.

The three boys of our acquaintance were not behind any of the rest in manifestations of pleasure. They uttered whoop after whoop, while Father McNeirny stood smilingly regarding them through the tears that coursed down his cheeks. They sprang from a heart which had never become hardened by the daily painful sufferings of his ministry.

"Boys," he said, "God has been very good to us to-day in hearing our prayers and saving the life of that poor fellow cast upon our shore. We mustn't forget to give thanks for this favor we have received."

"We'll all offer up our next First Friday communion in thanksgiving," exclaimed Harry, speaking for his comrades and glancing at them for approval.

Fred nodded vigorously.

"Yes," he cried, "we'll promise to do that, won't we, Paddy?"

Paddy readily agreed, though he was more shy of expressing himself before the

priest, despite the fact that he was Father McNeirny's particular protégé.

"That's right," said the pastor, kindly, "so that if some of us should next want help it will be given to us."

The boys were deeply impressed by the solemnity of his manner, for when he was in conversation with the young folk his talk was ordinarily the very reverse of this. He was usually as cheerful and as full of jest as if he were a boy himself. In the pause that followed, Harry, whose manner had been growing more and more thoughtful, suddenly slipped away. No one heeded his departure, and it was something of a sacrifice on his part to leave that exciting scene. Nevertheless it had occurred to him that there was something which ought to be done. He sped, as swiftly as his limited capabilities would permit, to the Tremaine villa, proceeding at once to the stable. There he found Mike the coachman greatly dissatisfied that he had been unable to leave the horses and witness the spectacle.

"Harness up at once," cried Harry, cutting Mike's grumbling short, "and let us drive to the beach."

The boy's manner was unusually peremptory, and Mike, nothing loath to proceed to the scene of the excitement, obeyed, while Harry entered the house and gave a few hurried directions to Hannah.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOSPITALITY OF THE VILLA

THERE was another moment of intense excitement when the life-boat came to shore. Every one crowded about the spot with greetings and congratulations to the heroes who had snatched its prey from the sea. In the center of the vessel, wrapped in a heavy coat, which had been thrown over his drenched garments, was a spare and wiry man, about thirty-five years of age. His face was pale under the deep tan, or else its rigidity suggested paleness, the eyes were closed wearily, the wet hair hung dankly over the forehead, the lips were blue and a shivering, as of deadly chill, passed through the exhausted frame.

When the boat was made fast, and a couple of the men made a movement to lift him, the stranger suddenly opened a pair of

resolute gray eyes, that denoted character, and waving his helpers aside, arose, though with evident effort. Seeing his weakness Ben Masterson and another stalwart fellow seized him by either arm and assisted him to shore. Leaning upon them, he stood still a moment, gazing silently out over the ocean, whence he had come, with irrepressible shuddering. He spoke at last, in a low, shaken voice:

"It is well," he said, "to feel the land under one's feet again, and I thank you all a thousand times."

While he said the words he reeled as one giddy, clutching Ben and exclaiming with an air of vexation:

"Who would have dreamed of such a thing, that I should need an arm to hold me, like some fainting girl."

The spectators now began to look at each other; an idea, which singularly enough had not previously occurred to them, began to weigh upon their minds. What was to be done with this personage who was thus rescued from the sea? Of the villagers, who were mostly poor, scarcely one had a corner

to spare; and the summer cottagers, between themselves and their visitors, were in pretty much the same case. Even the hotels were crowded. Something, however, must be managed, and clearly it was expedient that something should be done at once. While every one hesitated, Father McNeirny, understanding the situation, exclaimed:

“Boys, you had better bring him up to my house,” and he added in an undertone, to some who remonstrated, “he can have my bed, you know. I’ll easily find a place to stretch my limbs.”

The stranger possibly heard, though he said nothing, as the remark was not meant for his ears, but he opened his eyes, which had closed through weakness, and fixed them a moment upon the priest. One difficulty yet remained in the way of carrying out this suggestion. The priest’s house was very far and there was no conveyance just then at hand. It would be a considerable distance to carry the stranger, whose exhausted condition required speedy attention.

In this awkward dilemma, the sound of wheels was heard, faintly at first, coming

down the village street. Everybody looked in that direction. If only a vehicle could be immediately procured, it would relieve the tension of an embarrassing situation. To the astonishment of the multitude—and, it may as well be confessed, of Fred himself—there was Harry, sitting beside Mike the coachman on the box of the Tremaine carriage, coming as fast as it was possible to drive in the soft sand. A murmur of applause, which finally rose into a cheer, broke from the assemblage upon the beach.

“It’s Harry Tremaine, by all that’s wonderful,” cried the priest. “Bravo, Harry, bravo, lad! It’s you that has a head on your shoulders.”

The boy, laughing and waving his cap, jumped down from his elevated position at imminent danger to his limbs. Reddening and confused by the applause, for he was not a forward boy, Harry explained:

“I brought our carriage down so that the gentleman might be moved at once.”

The stranger’s eyes fixed themselves a moment upon the speaker’s face, as they had previously done on that of Father Mc-

Neirny, and a smile relaxed the stern lines of his visage.

"I shall accept your kind offer, my boy," he whispered, "for I fear that I can not walk. Will you drive me to the nearest hotel?"

"The hotels are all full," cried Fred, who stood near, delighted at his brother's happy thought, "our parents are absent, but I know they would be only too glad."

The stranger hesitated:

"Are you and the other boy brothers?" he inquired after a slight pause.

"Yes, sir," answered Fred.

"Then you may take me where you will," declared the rescued man, as another fit of shivering seized upon him.

He was fairly lifted into the carriage by many willing hands and wrapped in heavy rugs. The Tremaine boys also insisted that Father McNeirny should come with them. Before entering the vehicle, the priest called Harry aside and questioned him.

"Is it quite convenient for you to accommodate the man at your house?" he asked, "for you know I have already offered to take him."

"Oh, I have made it all right with Hannah," Harry answered, "she will have everything ready by the time we reach home, and our house is a great deal nearer than yours, Father."

This being satisfactory, the priest seated himself beside the stranger, supporting the weary head upon his shoulder. Ben Master-son, in case his help should be needed, was directed to squeeze himself in beside Fred and Harry upon the front seat and Paddy Wallace was told to climb up beside Mike. As the carriage was about to start, the newly rescued man raised himself for a moment and spoke to those upon the shore:

"I thank you again, you brave men, who have saved me, and all who have been kind. Some day —"

But sheer exhaustion prevented further utterance, and at a sign from Father Mc-Neirny the carriage drove away, amid vociferous cheering from the crowd.

The man abandoned himself after that to his weariness, relaxing every muscle, and the short drive was made in silence. As the equipage drew up at the door of the villa,

the pale lips unclosed once more and the words were faintly audible:

“It was a gallant thing. I shall always be grateful to them.”

Father McNeirny could not help reflecting, though as the moment was unpropitious he said nothing, that this being, snatched so lately from the abyss, had thanked every one save the Supreme Master, whose almighty hand had been outstretched over the waste of waters to protect him in his imminent danger and to make his rescue possible.

As Harry had said, everything was prepared by Hannah at the house for the seafarer's reception. While Mike harnessed the horses, the housekeeper had been made aware of the happenings at the beach and of all that would be necessary. Like most of her race, Hannah Hogan was kindly disposed. She had the true Irish heart for all who were in misfortune and, moreover, she was aware that hospitality was at all times the law of the Tremaine villa.

She made ready a small room upon the ground floor and placed therein a dressing-

gown and other wearing apparel belonging to the master of the house. She also put blankets to heat and prepared a hot drink. Even while thus occupied, and after the unfortunate stranger had been put to bed, she was nevertheless tormented by misgivings, and these she confided to the boys:

"How'd ye know," she inquired, "but that this might be a lad who would go off with the silver?"

"Nonsense, Hannah," answered Fred; "why, he has just been taken off a boat away out in the surf, and I'm almost sure that he's a gentleman."

"Well, I leave it on you both, if anything happens," she declared, thus metaphorically washing her hands of the affair. This did not prevent her from observing with interest the removal of the stranger from the carriage to the villa by Father McNeirny and Ben. The villa, it may be proper to mention here, was a modern one, built of California shingles, unpainted and unadorned, save by the gables and the latticed windows. It was low and broad, with hardwood floors and galleries on every side.

Comfortably and even luxuriously furnished, though in a style suitable to a seaside dwelling, it gave every evidence of combined taste and wealth.

The stranger, having been transported into this delightful interior, was divested of his wet clothing and put to bed by Father McNeirny's own hands, assisted still by the faithful Ben. Hannah, despite her grumbling and her fears, moved about, eager to do everything for the comfort of the "poor drowned creature." It was only when all had been done that she followed the priest out to the gallery, expressing her uneasiness. She told him that it seemed to her a rash act to introduce a total stranger into the house, especially as the guardian uncle would not be down that evening.

"We'll leave Ben here with you and Paddy, too, who is a swift runner and could easily give the alarm," answered Father McNeirny, "but I don't really think there's the least necessity."

The priest's suggestion was adopted and Father McNeirny promised to call during the evening to see how matters were. The

stranger had vehemently refused the attendance of the village doctor, who lived at a distance, and up to that point there did not seem any need of his attendance.

CHAPTER V

A NIGHT VIGIL

BEN MASTERSON and Paddy Wallace went away about noon, promising to return without fail at nightfall. They brought to the listening and still curious groups the latest news of the stranger, which was that he was sleeping as soundly as though he were never going to wake again. The house had, on that account, to be kept very quiet, and Fred and Harry strolled aimlessly about outside. They had pledged themselves not to leave the grounds upon any pretence, lest they should be needed. They could not settle to anything, either work or play, so that the time seemed very long and they wished devoutly that the stranger would awake and tell them of his experiences.

At the dinner hour—which, during the

summer and when their elders were absent, was about one o'clock—they entered the house noiselessly, and tiptoed through the halls and peeped with the utmost caution through the crack of the door into the darkened room where the stranger slept. It seemed weird to perceive him lying there, his bronzed face, clean cut in its outlines and framed by the black, unkempt hair, thrown into relief by the white background of the pillow. The sleep was deep and profound, that of utter exhaustion, and the sleeper never stirred. Later on, when the afternoon sun, westerling, shed its mellow light upon the sea, gray now and placid in the long stretches of the outgoing tide, the boys went in again from the lawn and looked, but that profound slumber lasted still and there was not the slightest sound within the room but the man's own regular breathing. Going out once more, the two challenged each other to a game of marbles, which they played with smooth, round pebbles picked up on the beach, and continued at that fascinating sport until their interest therein had slackened. Things were becoming monotonous,

and the pair eagerly welcomed the stray knots of villagers who, on their way home from work, stopped at the gate for the latest news.

Father McNeirny arrived just as it was getting dark, but hearing that the rescued man had not yet awakened, went to take a look at him. Satisfying himself that all was well, he left, promising to return in the morning.

It was about eight o'clock and the long summer twilight was deepening into night, when Ben and Paddy, according to agreement, arrived, to remain till morning. Fred and Harry were as much elated over their coming as if they had been a pair of royal princes. It was such a delightful novelty to have their two friends for so lengthy a visit. Hannah had made preparations for them to sleep in the loft over the stable, where they could be summoned at once by the coachman's bell if any alarm should occur. But both declared that they were prepared to remain up the greater part of the night, in case of need. Ben had taken a good rest after his exertions of the morning,

and Paddy had likewise slept a couple of hours, so that they felt quite refreshed and ready for the vigil, which Fred and Harry, despite all remonstrances on the part of Hannah, expressed their determination to share. And this resolution the housekeeper felt herself quite powerless to shake. She therefore submitted to the inevitable with the best possible grace, and perhaps with a secret sense of relief. The four boys together, she reflected, must surely be a match for one man, however bold and desperate he might prove. She sent the cook and housemaids to bed at their usual time, but sat up a full hour later herself, until the good soul was fairly consumed with drowsiness, and simply had to retire.

She left an abundant supply of food in the larder, ready to the boys' hand, with some bottles of sparkling cider. She warned them, if they felt chilly, to light the gas-log on the hearth, adding all sorts of instructions as to their behavior, if anything should happen. She sighed heavily over the fact that Mike the coachman did not sleep upon the premises. She opened the stranger's door half

a dozen times at least to assure herself that he still slept and that his sleep was real. For at intervals she tormented herself with the suspicion that he might be only feigning.

To all outward appearance, the unconscious subject of her fears slept as profoundly as if he were never going to wake again, and certainly it seemed as if his slumbers were likely to continue uninterrupted till the morning.

The boys were, in fact, very anxious that Hannah should disappear, especially Fred and Harry, who felt that they could not taste the full flavor of this novel and mysterious adventure while she was still hovering near. At last her heavy footstep died away in the distance, and the four, drawing their chairs close together about the hearth, where they presently lit the gas-log, began thoroughly to enjoy themselves.

Ben whiled away the time by recounting in terse language, the stronger for its simplicity, his experiences in the life-boat, the effort that had been required to withstand the strength of the tide and the force of the waves. He described the approach to the

wreck, the arrival, and the rescue, the joy of the rescued man, and his belief at first that the vessel which had come to his succor was but a hallucination of his distracted fancy. He pictured the forlorn appearance of the castaway, and his desperate situation upon the slippery keel of the upturned boat.

"Was he terrified?" Harry asked, in the same cautious whisper in which all their conversation was conducted.

"He must have been scared!" Ben answered, "but he didn't squeal. He jest let us take him off quietlike, once he know'd that we was real men."

While they were still absorbed in this subject, and wondering what could possibly have been the man's sensations there in that tumultuous rush of many waters, the clock in the hall beside them, with a whirring rusty sound, suddenly announced the hour of twelve.

The watchers started at the sound, for it was a ghostly time, as the younger boys particularly felt, to be awake at all, and to be discussing thus a personage who had come amongst them in so thrilling a fashion, and

who now lay close at hand in a sound and trancelike sleep. By a simultaneous movement, Harry and Fred and Paddy looked toward the stranger's room, for the door opened upon that hall, and quite near where they were sitting. Even sturdy Ben, most practical and prosaic of mortals, glanced apprehensively over his shoulder. For the midnight hour has terrors for those to whom it is unfamiliar. All was still, however, and Harry began to rehearse in a measured way, and for Ben's benefit, the scene upon the beach. He described with a true dramatic instinct all that had happened after the launching of the life-boat. To this recital Fred and Paddy occasionally added a few minor details. He told of the solemn act performed by the priest when he gave conditional absolution to the man upon the wreck. Ben listened with the deepest interest and attention and from time to time he asked a question.

So absorbed were they all in the tale, that they did not perceive the gentle opening of a door close beside them, whence looked forth a bronzed face, shaded by coal-black

hair, and a pair of keen gray eyes. Instead of advancing toward the group, the man remained within the room and listened. It was a thrilling tale that he heard, and certainly none the less so because he himself was its hero; but it would have been hard to gather from his impassive face what impression was made upon him by these almost weird details. The boy described simply, but with unconscious art, that impressive moment when it seemed as if the figure upon the boat had been completely submerged, and would never rise again. Then the priest had stepped forward, and, raising his consecrated hand, pronounced those tremendous words of pardon. They had seemed to stretch out over that wilderness of ocean and to touch with an actual touch the hapless creature upon the wreck. Then, too, had the minister of God fallen upon his knees and prayed aloud, in strong and burning words, for the speedy rescue of the stranger, or, at least, for his happy death, his eloquent petitions rising to the God who rules the winds and waves.

After Harry had concluded his narrative,

there was a long pause, for even the most careless of the four was deeply impressed. There was not a sound in the hall save the ticking of the great clock, checking off, as it were, the footsteps of time, and yet the watchers failed to note that the door of the bedroom, which had been left ajar, was softly opened and that the stranger had stepped quietly forth. It is difficult to say what would have been the sensations of the boys, even if they had observed their singular visitor come forth from the room where they believed him to be still sleeping. No doubt, they would have got a shock, which they were to experience, indeed, in another manner.

"If he had been swept away, we should never have seen him nor guessed who he was," Harry concluded, "and we should never have known if he were a Catholic or if the absolution were of any use."

"That's so," assented Paddy, "and we wouldn't even ha' knowed if it was in time."

"It's a splendid thing to be a priest," Harry went on, "able to forgive sins, even when the person is away off like that."

But I guess the stranger ain't a Catholic."

"Why?" asked the others.

"Oh, I don't know," hesitated Harry, "except that he didn't say thank God, nor any prayer at all, when he got safe to land."

"Cricky, I'd have said prayers ef I'd been he."

"I dunno," said Ben, who was not very religious, "mebbe you'd forget, Paddy. It's awful tryin' to the head to be battlin' with the sea."

But Harry was not convinced. He felt that there was something wrong, and he stole a swift glance at the door of the bedroom. To his horror, it was open.

CHAPTER VI

A STARTLING APPARITION

JUST at that moment the boy felt a hand on his shoulder. He started and all the others gave a sympathetic jump. And no wonder, for there stood the stranger, his hair still unkempt, his eyes gleaming in the firelight. The first sensation of every boy

was one of terror, as though this were a ghost, or a being risen from the dead. Even when their alarm assumed a more concrete form, they began to think of Hannah's improbable suggestion, which under present circumstances seemed possible, that this man might be a robber. Also, that he might seek by fair means or by foul to possess himself of the silver and the other valuables which the house contained.

Three of the four, at least, strove to present a brave front. Ben Masterson, being strong and big, was naturally less frightened. Rising from his chair, a movement which the others imitated, he resolutely faced the newcomer. There was something weird and almost spectral in the latter's aspect as he stood quite still, regarding the group. The very manner of his arrival seemed uncanny. Harry's imagination was particularly active, picturing the sea as it would be like just then in the darkness, its surface ghastly in the starshine; its huge troughs, wherein the stranger had been so lately tossing, agitated by the rising wind. For it was the middle of the night, when the entire vil-

lage slept, and there was something eerie in that suggestion of intense loneliness overshadowing all things.

"Sit down, all of you," the man said at last, "and make place for me here at the fire."

This they did, not without a certain sense of relief that the speaker made no immediate attempt to reach the silver chest. If such were his intentions, or if he had any design upon their lives, why, even a respite was welcome. He sat down in the chair which Fred nervously offered and gazed thoughtfully into the fire for some moments without speaking.

The silence after a time became strained, and Harry, who thought it well to gain time and who was besides considerate for others, made a diversion by inquiring if their strange guest would like something to eat.

"Now that you remind me, I am hungry," the man replied, calmly.

Instantly Harry and his brother were on their feet, moving over a small table to the stranger's side and declaring that they would fetch some food. Fred, in his impul-

sive way, declared that there was a meat pie in the pantry. Harry stepped upon his toe, in a warning that came too late, and the boy could have bitten his tongue for the imprudence of his speech.

"Why do we not go to the pantry?" the stranger suggested genially, "that will save a lot of bother."

Fred stopped short in confusion, coloring deeply and exchanging glances with his brother and the others. The same thought occurred to every mind, that it was highly dangerous to bring the unknown to the very spot where the silver chest stood. Also that it was suspicious that he should have thrown out such a suggestion. The latter on his part observed the little by-play, and leaning back in his chair looked smilingly from one to the other as he inquired:

"Well, what's the matter? Has the pie no actual existence, or has my impulsive young friend here been too prodigal in his hospitable offers?"

"No, oh, no," cried Fred, "but you needn't stir. I will run and bring the pie here."

So saying, he was about to dart away, but

the man at the fire, who was likewise quick in his movements, intercepted him.

"Come, come," he cried, "why can't I go with you and take a snack in the pantry?"

"You're tired, sir, I'm sure!" remonstrated Fred.

"Not a bit."

"You must be stiff after being so long in the water!"

"Stiff? No; one would think I was a grandfather."

Fred was at his wit's end; he looked for further instructions to Harry, but that sagacious lad was himself nonplussed.

"I would rather bring the things here near the fire," Fred persisted.

"Pooh! Pooh! That is being too luxurious or too ceremonious. Lead on, I follow."

"No, I won't lead on!" cried Fred, driven to desperation.

The stranger looked at him curiously a moment; then he said:

"Oh, very well. I can do without the snack a while longer. I have far too much respect for such a floor as this to risk spoiling it with food."

The boys stood by, awkward and sheepish. The Tremaines, in particular, felt that it was contrary to the traditions of their house to let a guest be hungry, and especially one who had passed through such an experience and must be very much in need of food. Harry, who had been thinking matters over, felt that his brother's refusal was positively churlish, and perhaps, after all, the stranger meant no harm. He gave the others a glance, which meant that there was nothing else to be done, as he said apologetically:

"Oh, if you prefer to take something to eat in the pantry, come there, of course. We are hungry ourselves, and you must be starved."

"Not quite so bad as that," the man answered pleasantly, "but I will admit that the offer of food is very tempting."

He rose as he spoke, preparing to accompany his guides.

Harry contrived, however, to say a word to Paddy. "Will you mind staying here a while? One of us will relieve you presently. If you hear anything unusual give the alarm at once."

Paddy nodded and resumed his place by the fire.

If the stranger caught any of these instructions he gave no sign. But first, as the company were about to enter the pantry, he inquired:

"I thought there was another boy."

"Yes, oh, yes," answered Harry, confusedly.

"Isn't he hungry?"

"No, that is—yes, I shouldn't wonder!" blundered Harry.

"Come, you boy," the stranger called to the sentinel by the fire, who was eying his retreating comrades somewhat wistfully.

"No," responded he.

"Why not?"

Paddy, not thinking of any evasion, replied truthfully.

"Because I was bid to stay here."

"You are a regular Casabianca!" exclaimed the stranger.

"No, I ain't either," retorted Paddy, not fancying the name.

"What are you, then?"

"Nothing!"

"Have it your own way!" concluded the jester, as he entered the pantry. The others had fallen silent, thinking it highly suspicious that the man should wish to bring Paddy with them and so obviate all chance of an alarm being given. They edged into the narrow enclosure, fondly hoping to form a rampart about the silver chest. Then they began at once to ply their guest with food.

"Gently, my dear fellows, gently," expostulated he, "you overpower me with kindness. Just let me get a little nearer to the shelf and please don't try to stand all in the same spot."

The boys, on this broad hint, had to move a trifle, but they still strove to maintain a position between the silver chest and the stranger. The latter closed the pantry door, possibly to make more room, but in the jaundiced minds of the boys, to cut off their last chance of escape; then he peered over Harry's shoulder.

"What's that there behind you?" he inquired.

"I guess," answered Ben Masterson, desperately mendacious, "it's a bread-box."

“Oh, Ben, Ben!” exclaimed the stranger, shaking a reproving finger in the boy’s face, “that would contain enough bread to provision the whole village.”

After which by a playful movement, and with an exertion of muscular strength, surprising in one who had been so lately exhausted, he wheeled Ben about, moved the other two boys aside, and thus took his place behind the living rampart.

“A silver chest!” he cried, with an odd twinkle in his eye, “and full, no doubt, of the most valuable silver. Quite a treasure for some poor fellow of burglarious instincts. Meanwhile it will make an excellent seat; with your permission, I shall take possession and enjoy my supper the more.”

So saying, he seated himself upon the silver chest and began to partake with an excellent appetite of the various viands which Hannah had left ready. The bread and butter, the meat pie, the salad, and some fresh gingerbread, were all washed down by copious draughts of cider. The boys at first stood uncertain and perplexed, but finally recovering from their astonishment and en-

couraged by his word and example, they too began to help themselves to the various eatables. Harry had a remorseful recollection of poor, hungry Paddy, sitting alone in the hall, and he reflected upon the best means of slipping out himself and relieving the watcher from duty. While he thus pondered, as if divining his thoughts, the singular guest suspended his operations on the food, and said tranquilly:

“You may as well bring in the other boy—is Paddy his name?—I assure you it is quite useless to keep him on sentry duty.”

Harry reddened and Fred exchanged glances with Ben.

“It wouldn’t avail you in any case,” the man continued, “and it is really too bad to keep him famishing for want of food.”

So exhorted, there was nothing for Harry to do but to acquiesce, and before anything more could be said, Fred, the impulsive, rushed forth to seek for Paddy. Seeing his rapid approach, Paddy whispered tremulously: “Is the drowned man a robber? Oh, lave me out quick, till I give the alarm.”

“We’re not sure!” said Fred, “but any-

way we can't pretend to his face that we think so. He suspects something as it is. I'll stay here awhile, and you go into the pantry and get something to eat." Now this was an invitation which Paddy readily accepted, for he was, in fact, desperately hungry, and good things to eat did not often come his way. He hastened, therefore, to the place indicated, divided between curiosity and fear of the mysterious personage, whom he regarded almost as "a sperrit come back from the dead," and who might develop, however, into the still more formidable character of a burglar.

"Hello, Casabianca!" cried the stranger, "so you're off duty, and starving, I suppose. Well, I promise not to make any attempt upon the silver till your hunger is appeased."

Paddy's eyes, opening very wide, fixed themselves upon the speaker's face and wandered thence to the countenances of Ben and Harry, striving to read their thoughts. The array of victuals upon the pantry shelf, however, proved the most attractive of all, and caused the gazer's mouth to water.

"Come, sit down here upon the chest,"

continued the newly rescued, rising as he spoke; "its contents will be perfectly safe while you are seated upon the cover."

Paddy mechanically took the place which the other had vacated and also accepted from his hand liberal helpings of the various delicacies. In this latter office he was assisted by Harry, who suddenly awoke to the duty of hospitality and forgot his uneasiness in his gratification at Paddy's evident enjoyment of the food. When Paddy had eaten as much as he possibly could, the man of mystery put his head out of the pantry door and called to Fred:

"Come in here, my lad; that sentry business is a farce."

The whisper came hoarsely, almost weirdly down the hall, and Fred's first inclination was to make for the door and rouse the sleeping village. But there were difficulties in the way of this undertaking, and the stranger's eye was upon him, as he repeated the summons in a commanding tone. Fred almost involuntarily obeyed, for even if he could have done so with any prospect of success, he was unwilling to sound an alarm without

some definite ground of suspicion. Scarcely had Fred entered the small enclosure, when the stranger closed the door and snatched a carving-knife from the shelf. The smaller boys were simply paralyzed with terror. They felt that their worst fears had been realized, and that this miscreant, having found entrance to the house through mistaken kindness, was about to repay their benefactions by doing what—?

There was a full and deliberate pause, through which sounded the ticking of the clock in the hall, curiously distinct from the noise of the surf outside and the shrill cry of the night-bird. Then the stranger spoke again, this time in a terrible voice:

“Shall I cut off all your heads, or shall I simply bind you and leave you here while I make away with the booty?”

He looked both fierce and menacing as he stood before them. His singular attire, the ancient dressing-gown and wide trousers which Hannah had temporarily supplied him with while his own clothing had been drying, gave him so much the aspect of a pirate that even the strongest and bravest of

the boys felt a beating of the heart and a leaping of the pulses.

"Look here, mister!" exclaimed Ben Masterson, looking the stranger steadily in the eye, with a bold and resolute demeanor, "a joke's a joke, but I guess you'd better drop that knife."

"How, knave?" roared the stranger.

"Keep your names to yourself, I ain't no knave," retorted Ben, surlily, "and I tell you agin to drop that knife and let the silver alone. We're only boys, but we ain't goin' to stand any nonsense."

Fred and Harry had valiantly ranged themselves beside Ben, forming a rampart once more before the chest, while Paddy cowered in the background, half inclined to whimper, and audibly wishing that the stranger had been left in the sea. The latter, replying to Ben's defiance, and advancing upon him step by step, exclaimed:

"You mean to say that you will prevent me taking the silver from the chest, and everything else from this house if I choose to do so?"

"We'll try to prevent you!" cried eager

Fred. "'Cause we're in charge of this house, and we brought you in here."

Harry, who had been watching the stranger closely with a dawning smile in his blue eyes, added, quietly: "And we know very well, sir, that you have no intention of taking the silver or anything else."

The stranger, dropping the knife, extended both his hands to Harry with a genial laugh:

"So, you are the only one who believes in me," he said, "it speaks well for your penetration, lad, for I haven't the remotest intention of looting anything, not even the remains of that excellent meat pie. Let us go and sit down by the fire and have a talk, since I suppose it is on my account you are all out of bed."

He laughed, and, drawing Harry's arm through his own with a boyish gesture, led him away toward the fire. The others followed rather sheepishly, but the man's cordial manner presently dispelled the last vestige of their embarrassment.

"It was downright mean of me," he cried, "to play upon your fears, and after all your

kindness to me, too. But I couldn't for the life of me resist. You were so desperately in earnest and so resolved to think the worst of me."

"And," he resumed, as he sat down amongst them in his former place by the fire, "that is a great mistake, boys. I have knocked about a good deal and experience has taught me that it is wiser to think the best of every one, as long as that is possible."

"But still," argued Fred, who was nettled at the joke played upon him and his companions, "we had to take care of the silver, especially as we brought you here, and we didn't know whether you were honest or not."

"Oh, that's very true, and I must say that I admire the brave stand you took. Ben, there, showed the qualities of a hero, as he did in the life-boat, and you two stood by him well. And Casabianca did faithful sentry work. Nevertheless, I wouldn't, if I were you, take it for granted that every unknown man you meet is a villain."

The boys hung their heads for a few moments after that, and Harry, the reasoner,

worked out in his mind how their false conclusions concerning this person and their fear of him had all arisen from very small beginnings; namely, from the idea, which Hannah had been the first to moot, and of which they had themselves in broad daylight declared the improbability.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRANGER DESCRIBES HIS SENSATIONS

THE stranger, anxious to dispel any unpleasant impressions, turned the conversation to other subjects and the boys asked him for an account of his adventures. Drawing in the circle, so as to be closer to the fire, for the night grew chillier and chillier, they set themselves to listen. They were too excited to feel drowsy, though never before had the unholy hour of two found them out of bed.

“I shall not tell you whence nor why I started on that expedition which ended so disastrously, nor how I came to find myself

alone in an open boat on the sea. Nor shall I tell you my name. For the present, at least, you must be content to know me as the Man from Nowhere."

He paused, looking into the fire, then he added in his humorous way:

"And you needn't begin to imagine, as some of you, perhaps, are already doing, that my reasons are grave and weighty, that I was a fugitive from justice, a desperate villain, a defaulting bank president, or a discarded lover. My reasons, no doubt, were commonplace enough, unless, of course, you choose to invest me with a halo of romance. In that case, you may weave any web for me you wish. I may be anything from a sea-god down to Davy Jones himself. It is better to leave it so. Nothing I could say would improve matters."

"It must have been awful when you found yourself out there," murmured Fred, indicating by a gesture the sea, which lay restless and agitated under the starshine.

"Yes, it was an awful sensation," the stranger agreed, "to realize that I was hope-

lessly adrift, at the mercy of the waves, my sail broken, my rudder useless. I can not express my feelings when my boat keeled over, and desperately, with a fierce death-grip, I clutched the side. After that I managed to gain a precarious place upon the slippery surface, where I maintained my position with the utmost difficulty. It was all so sudden; I had scarcely time to think, and then began that hopeless agony of suspense. Under the clear sky of heaven, that mocked me with its brightness, I was buffeted by the waves, driven shoreward, only to be forced relentlessly back again. Facing Death as a grim wrestler, who might at any moment throw me, I shudder still. I shall always shudder when I recall my fearful situation and the horrible swish, swish of the water, mingled with the distant breaking of the waves upon the shore. After the first period of stupefaction, I tore a red handkerchief from my neck, and managed to hoist it upon a broken spar, in the faint hope that it might be noticed. But the hope seemed futile, out there in that terrible waste of waters, so far from any human being,

where there were only sea and sky, only sea and sky."

He stopped abruptly, as if overcome by the recollection. Presently resuming:

"I seemed a mere speck, an atom, less than the worm that crawls upon the earth, and oh, how I envied that worm. What visions haunted me of the warm, red earth, and the pleasant country sights and sounds. Even the pavement of city streets, the darkest and most squalid, seemed supremely desirable, so long as they were stable and did not move beneath me, like that horrible, restless, unsteady mass of boiling, tumbling waters. The very sunlight upon its surface was hateful; it seemed to gild the bars of the dreadful dungeon that was prepared for me."

The speaker appeared rather to be communing with himself than addressing his hearers, and by pouring out his feelings, to relieve his mind from intolerable oppression.

"Sometimes," he continued, "I closed my eyes in a kind of despair, eager to shut out the hateful spectacle, and I strove to imagine that I was safe and happy ashore. I had a secret hope that if I must die I should

drift quietly over the borders into some other existence, without any pain or struggle upon my part. Again, my strained eyes wandered over the stretches of sea, in search of any hopeful token, or they were raised to the sky in fearful anguish. Strange sounds began to strike upon my ears, strange visions to float before my eyes. At times I was submerged by an immense wave, and when I arose again, gasping and choking, I almost wished that it was all over, and that I should never more rise from those depths."

The man shuddered strongly and visibly, as he continued, while his listeners waited in awestricken silence.

"A horror came over me of the depths of the sea. I pictured to myself all that I had ever read of those mysterious regions. The seaweeds, twining in dank clusters about my lifeless body, the sea-monsters, the mollusks, the polypi, fish of every size and shape, darting about with phosphorescent gleam, eager, greedy, voracious. I felt as if the leaden eyes of the shark were already watching me, ready to drag me downward; and imagination I shivered at the cold touch of the jel-

ly-fish. I wondered if it would be dark down there in those caverns, dark, horrible, ghastly, while surges boomed overhead. Despairingly, I thought of children playing in green fields—I shall always love the sight—and of men digging in the warm earth and of the smiling faces of women, happy under the sunlit sky.”

The boys, half terrified, dared not break upon these awful recollections by so much as a syllable, and the narrator, drawing a long breath, proceeded:

“By the time the life-boat had set out from the shore, my mind was hopelessly confused. I fancied, indeed, once or twice, that I heard the faint distant sound of a cheer and the murmur of human voices, and oh, lads, you shall never know, unless you are in danger of losing its music forever, what power there is in the human voice, especially when it vibrates upon ears sharpened by imminent peril. Had not my faculties been thus deadened I should have hailed the sound as a message from the gods. On the other hand, but for that merciful numbness, I might have gone distracted with joy and

leaped into those yawning gulfs to meet my deliverers. For it was not even the fear of death that oppressed me so much as the horror of the loneliness and terrible isolation in the depths to which I must descend. When the boat at last drew near, I believed it to be a vision, and its crew unreal shapes conjured up by my distorted imagination. After that I remember little more until the moment of landing, when I stepped ashore and found myself reeling, giddy, as an intoxicated person, upon the blessed land."

Harry broke the long pause that followed by asking, half shamefacedly, as a boy is apt to do, when he touches on sacred things:

"Didn't you say any prayers, sir, during that awful time?"

"Prayers!" echoed the man, fixing a strange look upon the boy, "why, my lad, why should *I* pray, even if there is any one who can hear?"

"Oh!" cried Harry and Fred in unison, their voices expressing the deepest horror, which Paddy supplemented by his favorite exclamation of "Cricky!"

Even Ben looked grave, though he was

far more accustomed than the others to hear such sentiments from the men about him.

"Well," said the stranger, waiving the last point of his discourse, when he perceived the effect it had produced on his listeners, "I had no right to call on God, if there be a God. It is a score of years, at least, since I have bent the knee."

"A score of years!" repeated Harry, "and weren't you ever afraid at night, or when there was a storm?"

"I suppose I was afraid at first, but I shook the feeling off or it gradually fell from me. I did not trouble my head much about the matter, but out there upon the sea it would have terrified me most of all to know that there was a God whom I had despised and neglected."

He stopped as if overcome by the force of a powerful emotion. His face grew positively ghastly and an expression of terror came into his eyes. The boys never forgot that look and the change in the man's whole aspect. Harry always said afterward that it was a lesson to him whenever he felt

tempted to shirk his prayers or neglect his religious duties. For in that instant they had some inkling of what it would be to have lost their faith in God. Fred fully agreed with his brother and even Paddy Wallace of the limited opportunities, talked of the matter afterward to the others and declared that from that time forth he would "mind what the priest said and try to be a good Catholic." Ben could not formulate his ideas upon such subjects, but agreed that "it was a rum thing to have no religion, especially if a man was goin' to die."

The stranger did not, however, pursue that branch of the subject. Quite unconscious of the excellent lesson he had conveyed to his hearers, he deemed it unwise to obtrude his own unhappy skepticism on these young understandings. He suddenly inquired instead of Fred, who sat nearest to him:

"What was that I heard some of you telling just as I came out of the room?"

Fred hesitated and looked at Harry, who, after a moment's reflection replied:

"I was telling Ben, because he was away

in the life-boat, how the priest gave you absolution."

"Gave me what?"

"Absolution. Don't you know what that is?"

"I have heard the word, but I confess I haven't a very clear idea of its meaning. So you may as well enlighten me."

"The priest has power, you know," explained Harry, "when any one goes to confession, to absolve him, to give him absolution."

"But I didn't go to confession."

"No, I was going to say, though," went on the boy, "that when any one goes to confession he makes an act of contrition and tries to be as sorry as he can for his sins, before the priest forgives them; that is, gives absolution. If a person is in danger of death, the priest, on the chance that he is sorry, gives him conditional absolution."

"How could he give this thing when I was so far away?" persisted the skeptic.

"Oh, that doesn't matter," cried all the boys in unison, "that doesn't matter a bit."

"It was when the waters went over you

one time," continued Harry, "everybody on the beach thought you were gone. Father McNeirny went down to the edge of the water and put on his stole; it looked awfully solemn. Then he knelt down and said a prayer. After that ——"

"After that," repeated the stranger eagerly.

"He raised his hands and said the words in Latin."

"What are the words?"

"*Ego te absolvo ab omnibus peccatis, in Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti.* And then he said in English: 'May the Almighty God have mercy upon you and forgive you your sins and bring you to everlasting life, Amen.' It was terrible. Every one kept still, there was only the noise of the waves."

"It sent a cold chill down my spine!" added Fred.

"Golly, I was most scared to death!" volunteered Paddy.

The stranger shaded his eyes with his hand:

"Say those words again," he begged, in a low, broken voice, "say them slowly that I may understand."

And as the boy's clear tones repeated over again that saying of tremendous import, two big tears were seen to escape from the man's eyes and roll down his cheeks.

"It was beautiful," he exclaimed, at last, "that a stranger who had never seen nor heard of me in his life should pray like that for me to the Being in whom he believes." Falling silent again for a moment, he declared presently, with emphasis:

"And he must believe, boys; he must believe or he would never have prayed as he did."

"I don't think you quite understand," persisted Harry, "he wasn't praying then, exactly; he was giving you absolution—forgiving you your sins by the power which God gives to priests."

"Forgiving me my sins!" the stranger repeated dreamily.

"And after that, he knelt down and prayed and asked all the people to pray that you would be saved from the sea, or that God would have mercy on your soul."

The listener sighed deeply and passed his hand over his forehead, as one bewildered.

"It is I," he murmured to himself, "who seem like an ignorant child, and these boys possess a wisdom to which many men never attain."

Aloud he added:

"I must try to see this priest—one of the good Samaritans of yesterday—and have a talk with him before I leave the place."

CHAPTER VIII

DISAPPEARANCE

BY THAT time the dawn was whitening the east, pale streaks of light stole through the windows and the boys began to feel overpowered by drowsiness. The stranger then brought their vigil to an end by declaring that he would go out for a stroll upon the beach while Ben and Paddy wended their homeward way and Fred and Harry retired to bed. He laughingly assured them once more that they need not have the smallest apprehensions, as he harbored no evil design upon the dwelling. Re-

tiring to the room wherein he had slept that trancelike sleep, he resumed his ordinary clothing, which Hannah had dried and replaced there, and coming forth again he shook hands with the two Tremaines.

“Good-by for the present, my hospitable hosts,” he said, “you have placed me under an obligation which shall last all through my life.”

He held Harry’s hand a moment longer in his own as he added:

“And you were the first to believe in me, my boy. That is another debt which I shall not speedily forget.”

“But,” cried both boys simultaneously, “you will come back for breakfast? We shall see you, again, after a while?”

“After a while,” assented the stranger. Then he went out with Ben and Paddy, pausing at the gate, where their roads separated, to take leave of his companions, and to express to Ben in a few earnest, heartfelt words his lasting gratitude for the service he had rendered on the life-boat. This done, and as the two turned in the direction of the village the stranger went down to-

ward the ocean, which was touched by the pale streaks of light in the East, warming into a rosy flush that dyed the shimmering waters. Even its faint, tremulous beauty did not, however, appeal to the stranger's imagination. He looked out with a shudder upon the smooth, treacherous expanse, where so lately he had agonized. Standing thus, he heard a step behind him. He turned and saw approaching a tall, strongly built man, clad in a plain black suit and wearing a straw hat. He recognized him with something of a shock as the Catholic priest who in more ways than one had rendered him efficacious service on the morning previous. With a sudden vivid recollection of the scene which the boys had so graphically portrayed, he advanced to meet the newcomer, extending a hand in cordial greeting.

"I believe you are Father McNeirny," he said, using the essentially Catholic title with a genial warmth which was pleasant to hear. The priest looked at him a moment, and then started back in astonishment, exclaiming:

"You are surely not ——"

"What the woman up yonder called 'the poor drowned man,' " cried the stranger, finishing the sentence. "I am indeed he who has to thank you for so many kind offices."

"Are you not imprudent?" Father Mc-Neirny responded, gravely, as he shook the stranger's hand cordially. "Don't you think it unwise to get up so soon, and to come out here in the chill of the morning?"

"But I didn't get up soon," laughed the stranger. "I slept the whole day long and up to midnight, and as for the rest, I am as well as ever and don't feel the slightest ill effect from my drenching and 'drowning.'"

"You must be very hardy," observed the priest.

"Yes, I suppose I am. I have wintered amidst many snows and baked under many suns and water has been almost my element."

He turned his eyes once more with singular fascination to the ocean, while the same visible shudder shook his frame.

"And," he concluded, "it was very near being my grave this time."

"Yes, it was a close call," assented Father McNeirny, seriously.

For a moment there was silence, for the thoughts of both were dwelling on the so nearly tragic occurrence that had agitated the tranquil village by the sea.

"Besides your great kindness after I came ashore," resumed the unknown, "the boys up yonder have told me of another way in which I am indebted to you."

"What is that?" inquired the priest, with a touch of curiosity.

"They told me how you prayed for me and gave me what is it—the forgiveness of sin?"

"Absolution!" the priest answered with a smile. "Of course that was only because I thought you were in *extremis*. It should properly be followed now by some action upon your part."

"What action?"

"Oh," laughed Father McNeirny, "I am not going to begin a series of instructions. I judge from your manner of speaking that you are not a Catholic."

"No, I am not a Catholic; neither am I

a Protestant, nor anything else in particular. Still, that rite which you practiced ——”

“You speak as if I were a magician.”

“So you are, in a sense. For according to those boys you claim to exercise a tremendous power, overleaping space, greater than life or death. But whatever you may choose to call that ceremony, it has somehow impressed itself upon my imagination.”

He stood facing the priest and speaking with curious earnestness.

“I shall not soon forget,” he went on, “that description of your upraised hand and your mysterious influence, reaching out over that waste of waters and touching my soul—if I have a soul.”

Father McNeirny laid his hand upon the other’s shoulder.

“If you have a soul,” he repeated, “oh, never doubt it, never doubt it, the longest day you have to live! Look up at the sky, look out upon the ocean, look at nature everywhere, and ask if the God who created those things did not in some way differentiate you from the brute.”

It was a singular scene and a still more

unusual conversation between the two men, standing thus soul to soul, as they might never have done under any other circumstances, nor in all the chances of life. And while the rosy flush of morning deepened, and the arrows of the newly born light quivered into the depths of the sea, they remained for some time talking of those subjects most vital to mankind. The man, who had but yesterday come back from the grave and whose career had been so different, put swift searching questions to the cleric, the minister of religion, who had practically given up his own life for his fellows. And the questions were answered simply and sincerely.

The stranger was deeply impressed. He felt a new confidence, almost a new hopefulness from his contact with this priest, who could speak so strongly and convincingly, in simple, direct speech, and with the authority which his office imparts. As the two shook hands in parting, the layman said, half laughingly:

“Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.”

“Only Him by whom I am sent can do

that," Father McNeirny replied gravely.

He found, however, many hopeful signs in this mysterious personage and trusted that he might have many future opportunities of pursuing that first advantage. He said no more on the subject at the moment, however, but remarked instead:

"You will feel, no doubt, rather inclined to keep away from the ocean for some time to come."

"I don't know," answered the stranger, "it has always had a wonderful fascination for me. Even if I go away, it is sure to lure me back again. I can quite understand what gave rise to the old fable about the Sirens. Wherever I may be I am quite certain to hear its voices ringing in my ears and to feel its salt breath in my nostrils."

"Well, I hope you'll always have as fortunate an escape," replied the priest, "though never quite so narrow a one."

"Thanks. And don't judge me too harshly. I might have been a Christian, and a good one, if only I had had the chance."

"It's never too late," answered the priest, "bear that in mind. And now, good-by for

the present. I have some more sick people to see before breakfast and I also have to say my Mass."

"Good-by," answered the man, and with a warm handshake the two parted there where the ocean almost drowned their voices.

Father McNeirny, when he had gone a certain distance, turned and looked back, seeing the stranger still standing by the shore. The latter waved his hand, and that was the last the priest saw of him. For the stranger was missing at the breakfast hour, when Hannah awakened the weary boys; and he was missing at the dinner hour, and he had not yet reappeared when night had once more settled down upon the village. It almost seemed as if the sea had swallowed him up after all.

Harry and Fred, Ben and Paddy and many another scoured the village; there was, in fact, a small hue and cry. The disappearance occasioned a nine-days' wonder. The Tremaines in particular and a number of others, including Father McNeirny, were disappointed, and the latter felt secretly alarmed at the possibility of some untoward

accident. Amongst the superstitious it was averred that the mysterious personage had not really been of flesh and blood. But whatever the truth of the matter, one thing was very certain, indeed, that the "man from nowhere" had apparently vanished whither he had come.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

FATHER MCNEIRNY'S PICNIC

THE village after that settled down into its habitual calm, the inhabitants proper falling into the easy jog-trot way whence the incident of the shipwrecked man had momentarily roused them, and stolidly pursuing their various avocations. It is true that the summer visitors kept up a certain bustle and stir about the hotels and bathing places until July had given place to August and even that torrid month was mellowing toward autumn and rejoicing in cool, bright days. Then it was that the residents of the cottages, the Tremaines for instance, and their circle declared that the pleasantest part of the season was at hand and they usually prolonged their stay until the late October announced the approach of winter.

It was precisely upon one of these delightful August days that Father McNeirny

gave his annual picnic. Many pages might be consumed in describing how everybody concerned looked forward to that event. The old, with the mild exhilaration of their years, to a festivity to which they were not only invited, but were special honored guests. The young girls put on their best finery, certain that they would meet there every eligible young man within miles of the place, while the young men were equally sure of encountering every desirable girl in the parish. Parents went to look on at the enjoyment of their children, and the children—well, Father McNeirny was, by excellence, the children's priest. He knew just exactly what every boy in the place wanted and had a pretty shrewd idea besides of what would please their sisters.

The picnic, in fact, was always an occasion when young and old, rich and poor, Catholic and Protestant, thoroughly enjoyed themselves. It was to be held that year in what were known as the "big woods." Their cool, dark depths, redolent of the pine, the sassafras, and the wild grape, were a joy in themselves. There, squirrels and chip-

munks ran riot in the enchanted solitude, and birds flitted about from alanthus to oak, from birch to juniper, singing their carols and adding their joyousness to the human festivity.

For many days before, Father McNeirny and his aides were at work. These aides consisted of Fred and Harry, Ben and Paddy, with a few other boys of the parish. For the priest liked reliable fellows who could be trusted to finish what they undertook and to carry out his orders. A good-sized tent was erected in a clearing of the forest. Trestle tables and benches were arranged at intervals for those who did not care to sit upon the ground nor eat from a table-cover spread upon the grass. A stand was erected for musicians, and a space was reserved for games or races. In fact, nothing was neglected that could contribute to the amusement of the guests. Father McNeirny had been, moreover, in conference for a couple of weeks before with half the housekeepers of the village, nearly every one of them having donating something of her best workmanship toward the supply of food.

There is very little doubt, however, that despite their anticipations, the four trusty friends took an almost keener pleasure in the days of preparation than they did in the picnic itself. They were in constant consultation with Father McNeirny; like so many busy bees they roamed in and out of those pleasant woodland places, lending a hand here or there, or they met upon the gallery of the priest's house, outside the kitchen window, to assist old Bridget in a variety of culinary details. They shelled nuts for the nut-cake or candy, they cut orange peel into strips, they blanched almonds, they beat up eggs and weighed sugar, and they finally helped to pack the good things and to transport them to the festive scene.

At last the momentous day arrived. Almost every household was astir at peep of dawn, anxiously verifying the predictions of the previous evening—the red sunset, the clear sky, the bright stars—with regard to the weather. Fred Tremaine, emerging from the villa, gave a wild “hurrah,” which was presently echoed by his more phlegmatic brother, and by Paddy Wallace, who was

already on the lawn with a message from Father McNeirny. Fred seized the messenger and waltzed him up and down, crying:

"It's going to be fine! It's going to be fine!"

"You bet!" agreed Paddy. "There ain't been a finer day this season."

"Isn't it splendid!" ejaculated Fred, "if it had been raining, I think I'd have gone back to bed and stayed there."

"You look mighty fine, Paddy!" said Harry. And Paddy looked with complacency down at his checked suit, supplemented on this occasion by shoes and stockings.

"Father McNeirny give me the clothes," he said, complacently, "they're most as good as new."

The boys turned him round and surveyed his new acquisitions admiringly, entering into his gratification in a quite fraternal spirit.

"The others were rather ragged," Harry admitted.

"I tried to put on patches," Paddy ex-

plained, "kase my aunt's too blind to sew, but I didn't git them right. The one in the knee twisted me so I couldn't walk."

"I once tried putting on a patch at the college," Fred agreed, with ready sympathy, "but I couldn't move at all till I got it off."

"Anyway, it burst," Harry added, reminiscently, "it's only women or tailors can get patches right. But what did Father McNeirny send you for?"

"The loan of another big basket," Paddy answered. "I have to bring it over to his house."

"I'll get one from Hannah," cried Fred, rushing round to the back of the house, where the housekeeper was helping the cook to pack in a hamper the villa's contribution to the picnic.

"Father McNeirny wants a basket," cried Fred, putting his head in at the kitchen window.

"Sure we're gettin' it ready as quick as we can," replied the cook.

"He wants an empty one."

"Does he, then?" cried the cook, with a wink at her colleague. "If I'd known that a

week ago, I might have spared myself a heap of work. Mebbe it's better to take the things out, Hannah."

"Oh," said Fred, who failed to see the joke, "don't do that. Of course he wants the meat and cakes and pies, but he'd like the loan of another basket."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" cried the cook, pretending to be relieved, while Hannah, less facetiously inclined, bustled into the cupboard and brought forth a large two-lidded basket.

"I'll tell you what," declared the housekeeper, as she delivered this through the window to Fred, "if I don't get that basket back again I'll raise Cain."

"How will you do that, Hannah?" called back Fred, already in motion with the basket and quite indifferent to her threats.

"Never you mind how I'll do it!" Hannah shouted after him, "but keep your eyes on that basket and tell Bridget yonder to send it back to-night."

Fred promised and ran off whistling to join his comrades, who cheerfully lent a hand with the basket and together they con-

veyed it to Father McNeirny's house, where the priest and Ben were already at work.

Who can ever describe a picnic—or any other red-letter day, for the matter of that? So much depends upon individual impressions, and how is it possible, for instance, to express the sweetness of the summer woods and all that they suggest. That sylvan solitude was at its best on the particular morning when Father McNeirny and the boys arrived there, before the appearance of any of the guests. The air was full of aromatic odors, the grasses were stirred by a gentle breeze, and through the interlacing tree-tops the sun relieved the twilight. Nor can the various features of that merry-making be set down in these pages, since they would in themselves fill a good-sized volume. Suffice it to say that the picnic was altogether a success.

The viands, to which were added the proverbially excellent sauce of an appetite sharpened by the sea-air, were perfect. Turkeys, chickens, hams, cold beef and tongue, meat pies and salads, were supplemented by jellies and creams and flaky

pastry and delicious cakes; candy and nuts abounded, crowned by the ever popular ice-cream. The music was both lively and inspiring, the host truly a host in himself—through his thoughtful consideration for others, his self-effacement and his genial good humor.

The company was for the most part a congenial one, upon which circumstance depends more than half the pleasure of a social gathering. The “grown-ups” formed themselves into pleasant groups, or went wandering about in the sylvan coolness and freshness, resounding now with sounds of talk and laughter. The trees and their feathered tenants heard, no doubt, many a happy secret, for several engagements dated from that day and banns were called in church as a result of the picnic.

The boys and girls had, however, the best of the fun, and fairly exhausted the means of enjoyment. Some of the more imaginative, amongst whom may be counted at least three of our acquaintances, that is to say, Harry and Fred and Paddy, found themselves assuming some half a dozen charac-

ters during the course of those long, bright hours. They were alternately travelers lost in a desert, suddenly coming upon overloaded tables, or bears, finding nuts and other provisions in hollow trees. Now, they were hunters seeking game, or robbers springing out upon unwary wayfarers, and bringing them to fastnesses in the depths of the wood. Ben, being rather too much grown-up and too prosaic for such pursuits, lent his strength and practical good sense to the games that depended upon muscle.

That feature of the occasion which forms a link with the incidents of this narrative was a quiet hour in the afternoon, when the various groups sat resting under the trees, with the priest in their midst as a central figure. The conversation turned, as it chanced, upon wishing, and it was jestingly suggested that those present should severally or individually put their wishes upon record, and a secretary was actually chosen for the purpose. He seated himself upon the stump of a tree, prepared to jot down whatever should be suggested. Most of the older people either treated the matter as a joke,

refusing to express their preferences, or formed a combination representing the public good. Thus many graybeards, ably supported by their womenkind, were of opinion that a town hall was a necessity for the village, and that such hall should afford a meeting-place and recreation room especially for the young men. This unanimous opinion was put into the form of a resolution by Father McNeirny, and so recorded by the secretary:

“A motion has been unanimously carried by this company that a town hall, with its proper accompaniments of a reading-room and library, is imperatively required, and that whenever blind Fortune may choose to transmute wishes into solid cash, this project shall materialize.”

After that, amid great laughing and joking, several individuals caused their wishes to be inscribed, though many declared that it would do just as well to whisper them to the trees. Some, however, were explicit. Ben Masterson, for instance, wished for a complete and modern set of fishing-tackle, Fred for a tool-chest, Harry for a new

watch and Paddy for a few dollars to spend as he chose. The popular voice finally called upon Father McNeirny, and in response to a tumultuous demand from the boys to make a request, he finally acceded.

"If wishing were having and beggars might ride," laughed he, "there would be a heap of things to wish for in this parish, but as we are only allowed one wish, I'll say a set of vestments."

"A set of vestments," echoed the boys, "write that down."

"Let them be white," added Father McNeirny, "for it will be a white feast when the bishop comes to officiate in the fall. Those we have are a disgrace to any congregation and might well be changed for the better, if fairies were in existence or if the trees of this wood were enchanted."

Just as he spoke, the shrill cry of a bird, apparently disturbed in its nest, caused everybody to start, and Paddy Wallace to utter a frightened exclamation.

"Did you think it was a fairy, Paddy?" inquired the priest, with an indulgent smile, "instead of a poor, frightened little bird?"

"I thought it was *something*," Paddy an-

swered with a nervous glance over his shoulder, "and Cricky! what's that?"

"What's what?" every one asked. But Paddy could only say that he thought he saw a shadow, and his explanation was greeted with a laugh. The bird, meanwhile, still uttering sharp cries, flew away amongst the foliage, and a silence fell upon the company. The wishing was not resumed, and the paper, falling idly from the secretary's hand, must have been carried away by the light breeze that stirred the foliage. For the scribe, seeking it presently, found that it had disappeared. A feeling of uneasiness began to manifest itself amongst the guests, though no one could have told why, especially as they were startled soon after by several crashing sounds not far away.

A few of the younger men proposed to search the woods, but Father McNeirny laughed the matter off, declaring that no one ever went in search of fairies or hobgoblins. His own private opinion was that some tramp might be hovering near, and he did not wish his picnic to be marred by any unpleasantness, even though caused by a forlorn wretch who might be lingering about to

pick up what crumbs might be left over from the feast.

He set the Tremaine boys, with Ben and Paddy, talking about a crabbing expedition for the morrow, which had been previously proposed, and which was to take place in what was locally known as Norton's Creek. Their idea was to go there very early in the morning, after a hasty breakfast, and, if the sport was good, to continue until noon or even later. Our four acquaintances becoming absorbed in this fascinating topic, and discussing the pros and cons with eagerness, other groups were formed where other interests were uppermost, until the shadows began to fall and the picnic itself came to an end. For its numerous guests felt impelled to turn their steps homeward before dark. There was great shaking of hands, cordial thanks to Father McNeirny and farewells as heartfelt as if all were not to meet on the morrow, in precisely the same old groove. And so the woods were left dark and still, save for the soft whispering of the leaves, the vesper song of the birds and the insects chirping and droning at the dying of

the day. Only one human face after that appeared in the dusk and one pair of eyes looked upon the scene of the late festivity and its scattered remnants.

CHAPTER II

THE CRABBING EXPEDITION

FRED and Harry were up very early and out in the fresh morning air, delightedly sniffing up the salt breeze from the sea. They met Ben and Harry, who were waiting outside the gate, and together they proceeded to the scene of their anticipated sport. This was a clear and sparkling stream, running under what was locally known as Norton's Bridge. Each boy was provided with a crab-net attached to a long pole and a basket which he hoped to fill with a goodly share of the spoil. Each made a special toilet for the occasion, or more properly speaking, he partially disrobed, under the spreading branches of a forest monarch popularly designated "the umbrella tree."

It stood alone and distinct from the surrounding woodlands, and its leafy boughs spread out to a considerable distance, almost touching the ground on every side. Within the retreat thus formed was a carpet of soft green moss, pleasant to the feet, when the young sportsmen, save Paddy, who was already barefoot, had removed their shoes and stockings.

They rolled up their trousers to the knee and divested themselves of collars and neckties, turning up their sleeves to the elbow. Leaving these superfluous articles of dress in the impromptu dressing-room, they took up positions at various points upon the bridge, so that they might not interfere with one another's operations.

They were very soon absorbed in their attack upon the crustaceans, which now eluded every effort, and again were triumphantly bagged by one or other of their enemies. Sometimes a boy in his excitement descended to the creek, wading out knee-deep at some particular crisis. Fred in particular was disposed to pursue the game with nervous eagerness into its stronghold,

though not always with the happiest results. Once he cut his foot severely upon a broken shell, another time his toe was caught by one of the wily creatures he sought, and only with the greatest difficulty and several repeated blows was it induced to relax the vicelike grasp of its tenacious claw. He hopped out to the shore, in fact, carrying his foe with him, which was a certain, but not altogether pleasant method of catching a crab. Harry, meantime, stood upon the bridge in placid patience and filled his basket.

Paddy was so restless and impatient that—as Ben very strenuously and frequently informed him—he scared away the prey by his tugs and jerks and the continual shifting of his position. Ben was a great success at the business. He was, in fact, an expert at all kind of fishing, having had continual practice since boyhood. His eye was quick, his hand was sure and he wielded the net with such dexterity as to make a haul with almost every attempt. When need offered, he, too, went down boldly into the water, advancing to the very center of the stream.

But he moved cautiously and noiselessly, avoiding obstacles and planting a wary foot out of reach of the foe.

When the sport was at its height, Harry Tremaine fancied that he heard a rustling in a clump of small trees just behind where he stood and beyond which grew the umbrella-tree in majestic isolation. Mindful of the articles of clothing that had been left in the latter's shelter, he temporarily abandoned his station on the bridge and rushed into the thicket. He found everything silent there, however, as well as under their favorite tree, and he returned once more to the crabs. He looked a trifle grave, though, for his ear was true and quick and he was almost certain that he could not have been altogether mistaken.

"What are you rushing about like that for?" Fred inquired.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" retorted Harry, not caring to enter into explanations and plunging his net once more into the stream.

"Did you hear anything?" Ben inquired, after a pause.

Harry was forced to admit that he thought he had heard something.

"Great Scott!" cried Paddy, tremulously, "I guess it's the same thing we heard at the picnic!"

"Well, Sonny, what was that?" jeered Ben, "a chipmunk or a polecat?"

Harry offered no comment on that remark, but he could not help thinking that neither on that occasion nor the present had the sound resembled that made by so small an animal. Ben, who had a respect for Harry's judgment and knew he was not subject to vain alarms, presently addressed him with a shade of gravity in his tone.

"I guess mebbe it was old Norton's dog as you heard jest now."

"Perhaps it was," Harry answered, laconically.

"You didn't see nothin'?"

"No."

"Are you sure our clothes are all right?" asked Fred.

"Yes, I went to see."

Being satisfied upon this point, the whole four returned to their warfare against the

crabs, though Paddy thenceforth gave them a divided attention and cast many a timorous glance toward the dark clump of trees. So fascinating was the sport, however, to the boys, that the hour of noon had long passed before they bethought themselves of sundry slices of bread and butter which they had brought in a basket. The keen tonic of the sea air on that delightful morning had so sharpened their appetites that they regretted not having provided themselves with more substantial food. Hannah, with provident forethought, had offered to prepare a luncheon, but the boys, fresh from an excellent breakfast, had rejected the offer, declaring that they did not want to burden themselves with large packages. They sat down on the pebbly bank of the stream and let the water ripple over their feet and bathed their heated faces, for the sun was beginning to be hot. Then they retired to the coolness of their leafy retreat, to rest upon the mossy carpet and eat their meager supply of food.

"Weren't we fools to refuse Hannah's offer!" said Fred, disconsolately, after he

had eaten his allotted two pieces of bread and butter. "I could kick myself for being such a silly. But I thought, perhaps, we would be going back early, or that anyway we wouldn't be so hungry."

"It's no use crying over spilt milk," declared Harry, philosophically, "and if we get too hungry, we can go home sooner."

"And leave all those crabs there!" cried Fred, scornfully.

"If you had been fishin' as I've been for so many years," put in Ben, "mostly to gain a livin,' you'd know what it is to be hungry."

"I guess you would," chimed in Paddy, "lots o' times I had to go to bed almost starvin'."

"We ought to be ashamed to grumble, we're a pair of duffers," Harry exclaimed, and Fred, to do him justice, fully agreed with the sentiment. He lay back upon the moss, with a brave determination to utter no further complaint, when all of a sudden his eye was caught by an object dangling from one of the lower branches of the tree. At the same moment Paddy described it and pointed with tremulous finger.

"What's that?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper.

"It looks like a basket!" answered Fred.

"Where?" inquired the other two, and there was a breathless pause as the whole four became simultaneously convinced that it was indeed a basket. At first, they felt inclined to let it severely alone. It seemed portentous and almost weird that it should thus mysteriously have appeared before their eyes.

"It wasn't up there when we left our things here," declared Fred, "for I remember looking up into the branches and thinking what a jolly old tree this is."

Harry made no remark. He somewhat uncomfortably remembered the rustling he had heard.

"I reckon," said Ben at last, "that we'd best take it down."

He spoke softly, as though the basket were a sentient thing and could hear.

"No!" cried Paddy, trembling, "let's leave it and git away from here."

This course of action was, however, overruled by the majority. They sat still on

the velvet green of the sward, in a stillness that was broken only by the chirp of insects and the song of birds, eyeing the basket doubtfully. After the stillness had lasted for several minutes, Harry began, thoughtfully, and in a low voice, as if he feared a listener:

"Do you know, fellows, it always seems to me that the village has never been quite the same since that morning when we were digging the tunnel and saw the overturned boat in the offing."

"That's right!" assented Ben, "I kinder feel that way myself."

"I wonder where that man disappeared to," exclaimed Fred, looking carefully around him as he spoke.

"I guess he went back into the sea!" suggested Paddy, tremulously, "folks say he come up out of there."

"He wouldn't have needed a boat in that case," objected Harry.

"I don't believe in any of that stuff, of course!" declared Fred, "but I wonder where he went. I think he might have said good-by."

"He did say good-by," reminded Harry.

"Oh, in a kind of a way," growled Fred, "but he didn't tell anybody he was going."

"It was a rum way of sneakin' out of the village," agreed Ben.

After that there was silence, and all eyes were fixed upon the basket.

At last Ben observed, tentatively, looking at Harry:

"It 'pears to me as how we oughter look in that basket."

Harry nodded assent and Fred, who was always ready for action, jumped to his feet, and, standing on tip-toe, made two or three ineffectual efforts to reach the basket. But jump as he might his fingers barely touched the coveted object and set it swaying to and fro, like the pendulum of a clock. Then Ben interposed.

"If you go monkeyin' round like that, Fred," he said, "you'll bring the thing down on your head and mebbe break something. I'll go and get a stick."

He brought back a stout, gnarled branch of oak from the neighboring thicket, and securely hooked the prize. He drew it down

slowly and cautiously, as if it might contain a deadly torpedo. The others watched the operation silently, and stood grouped about in an impressive silence after it had been brought to earth. It was Harry who finally raised the cover, in his careful way, while the others watched with straining, eager eyes for the first glimpse of the contents. He put in his hand and brought forth a card, whereon was inscribed:

“To the Crabbers.”

A feeling of awe stole over the group as Harry read those words aloud. By whom could they have been written? No one even knew that they were coming there, save some of the villagers, and they would certainly not proceed in any such whimsical fashion. Paddy was ready to cry and felt very much like running away. It is possible that the others had something the same inclination. But bolder counsels prevailed, and curiosity overcame fear. It was Fred's hand that time which penetrated the mysterious recesses of the basket, taking thence a snow-white napkin. After that the delicious odor emanating from the basket urged all

four to the search, and the hungry boys, including the timorous Paddy, were presently on their knees beside Fred. One held open the lid, while the others brought forth in quick succession a cold chicken, several slices of jellied tongue, bread buttered with delicious fresh butter, a chunk of fruit-cake, and a blueberry pie. The last lingering doubt or scruple was removed by the sharpness of their appetites, and seated comfortably under the overspreading branches of the umbrella tree, the crabbers enjoyed this delightful repast which an unknown hand had prepared for them.

CHAPTER III

ANOTHER MYSTERY

THE boys, by Father McNeirny's advice, kept this mysterious happening pretty much to themselves. He held that nothing was to be gained by noising it abroad and that some mischief might be done, especially to timorous people. And if the matter had

ended there, the lads, with the happy carelessness of youth, would probably have forgotten all about it themselves. Very soon again, however, an unusual occurrence came to startle them into remembrance.

One day, a week or two after the episode of the umbrella tree, Paddy came running at full speed to tell the Tremaines that a shoal of bluefish was coming in and that Ben would take them out in his boat. This was joyful news, and it brought not only our two acquaintances, but almost the entire male population of the village to the shore. Such a busy scene as it was; boats of all sizes, from the handsomely rigged yacht down to the poorest apology for a sail-boat, were being made ready, while the beach fairly swarmed with baskets, boxes, hand-carts, in preparation for the abundant harvest that was expected from the sea. The men themselves presented a motley appearance, clad in their oldest clothes, redolent of the brine, or covered with tarpaulins. Every known species of fishing tackle was in evidence, bait in the shape of worms or tiny fish were being hawked about by barefooted

boys, for the benefit of those who were not provided with newer appliances.

The day was cloudy, which was a fortunate thing, since it was universally conceded that fish would bite more easily under gray skies than in the sunshine. Every sign was propitious. The minnows and other small fry hurried shoreward, pursued, as was attested by circle upon circle in the deeper water, by voracious enemies. Occasionally the shining scales of a bluefish became apparent to eager eyes.

Ben was already in his boat, which he shared with an old salt who had spent many years in the deep-sea fisheries and could tell thrilling yarns of stormy weather off Cape Hatteras or along the Newfoundland coast. The three late-comers were hurried aboard, the sails were set and away flew the little vessel in a spanking breeze, over the glassy surface of the inlet. As the surface of the water grew rougher, and the vessel began to lurch from side to side, Fred and Harry shrieked with delight, especially when they found themselves drenched by spray.

The serious business of the day once be-

gun, however, they were admonished by Ben and his taciturn partner to preserve an absolute silence, and were also instructed in the right use of the tackle. Fishing is a cruel sport, with many repellent features to the sensitive-minded, but when since the world began could its fascinations be resisted! The moment of expectancy, the pull upon the line and the trembling, eager delight with which the youthful fisher draws in his prey. When the fishing is poor, that delight is all too seldom experienced, but on this occasion the boat was fairly surrounded by eager and omnivorous mouths, only too ready to bite.

In fact, the experienced ones—including Paddy Wallace, who was, in a small way, an expert—could scarcely pull in their lines fast enough. In a short space of time every available receptacle and even the floor of the boat was filled with the squirming creatures, whose white flesh and gleaming scales contrasted with their sides of slaty blue, whence they derived their name.

Of course, the boat which contained our four acquaintances was not the only one

upon the fishing-ground. The main was presently alive with craft of every design, all intent on making what havoc they might amongst the finny tribes. It was an animated, picturesque scene, which would have afforded an excellent model for a marine painter, and it was one of unmitigated enjoyment to the fishers without exception, in addition to the profits that were to be reaped by sending the catch post-haste to the markets of New York and Brooklyn.

None of them all were more enthusiastic than Fred Tremaine, who vowed that he would like to forsake college and city life in general to follow the calling of a fisherman. He was less successful, nevertheless, than Harry as an angler, because he was too hurried and abrupt in his movements and inclined to jerk his line. This caused him frequently to lose his bite, or to break or entangle his line. Surmounting all these difficulties, he was finally enabled to make a very tolerable showing, when the sun began to go down, and it was deemed advisable to put ashore.

Ben and his partner landed the Tre-

maine boys as near as possible to the villa, together with the baskets containing their respective share of the spoils. With a genuine sigh of regret that that glorious day's outing was over, the boys watched the boat sail away spectral in the gray, misty twilight, which suddenly merged into living gold. The mist itself grew transparent as a radiant veil, overspreading the heavens and transforming the sea into a luminous plain.

Side by side, the two drank in great whiffs of the briny air, which seemed more than ever redolent of salt. Then they ran up to the house to get the assistance of Mike the coachman in transporting thither the heavy baskets of fish. They had no hesitation in leaving the fish where it had been landed, for apart from the fact that the villagers were mostly honest, every one in the vicinity was abundantly supplied on that particular afternoon with bluefish.

Mike procured a hand-cart and accompanied them at once to the spot. Even in that brief interval the light had faded, and the shades of evening were falling thickly.

It was a lonely part of the beach; there was not a living soul to be seen and scarce a sound to be heard, save a moaning wind, the swish-swish of the ebb-tide on the sand. As the baskets were being lifted into the hand-cart, something in their aspect caught the attention of the boys. They could have sworn that they were not as full as when removed from the boat, and that two or three large fish, at least, had been abstracted.

Mike laughed at the notion and could not be convinced, at first, that the baskets were not precisely as they had been left. When the boys, however, persisted in declaring that the contents of each basket had been overlapping, piled up and running over, the landsman began to look grave.

"Sarves you right," he grumbled, "for leaving them here alone. Why didn't one of you stop to watch them, instead of both trapesing up to the house after me."

The boys made no answer. In fact, their attention was attracted at that moment by something else. This was a large, distinct footprint. On examination, there were

found to be a series of footprints evidently belonging to a large man. They came from the direction opposite to the village, paused beside the baskets and returned upon the same trail.

"Who can it be?" whispered Fred, looking around him, and Harry, somewhat unnecessarily, replied in a mystified fashion that he didn't know.

"It's some tramp or another prowlin' about in the dusk," declared Mike, "and I'm thinkin' the sooner you get back to the house the better."

The boys acted upon this suggestion, proceeding thoughtfully, with many a backward glance, as they aided Mike to push the hand-cart upward and onward. The beach remained, however, undisturbed by any human presence. It was almost weird in its loneliness, the water dark and dreary, with no light of any sort to relieve its gloom. The mystery, the melancholy of the sea, seized upon their youthful imaginations, cold and chilly as a sea-mist, and mild and grotesque fancies filled their minds. Who could have come thus silently and unob-

served, to steal their fish, and to glide away again in impalpable darkness?

The very neighborhood of the ocean suggests awesome legends, gruesome tales told by night at forecastles, and conjures up a host of unreal phantoms, who float through all its narratives.

Hannah and the other servants at the villa were so alarmed by the occurrence that they were in favor of sending forthwith for the village constable and a posse of men to guard the house from attack. But as no one particularly relished the idea of taking a long, lonely walk in search of those worthies, the matter resolved itself into a committee of inspection. The fastenings of every door and window were examined, an alarm-bell, long disused, was put into commission, ready to be rung at a moment's notice, the watchdog was beguiled to take up an unaccustomed and unsolicited position on the hearth-rug in the dining-room, where he evidently felt uncomfortable and sniffed about him suspiciously, as if to inquire the meaning of this departure from all conventions. In fact, it is probable that his canine intelli-

gence was far more occupied with solving this problem than with looking out for possible marauders. Long after his philosophic acceptance of necessary evils had induced him to compose his anxious spirit into a sleep on the comfortable hearth-rug, Hannah and her assistants, assembled in conclave, started at every creaking of door or window in the wind that blew shoreward, at imaginary steps on the gravel, or other alarming sounds. Fred and Harry were kept in a nervous tension; together with Mike, who had consented to defer his home-going, they were put forward as defenders of the household.

The dog, too, was frequently roused from sleep and invited to bark, his attention being forcibly drawn to noises that his superior sagacity informed him had nothing to do with tramps or housebreakers. In fact, he maintained a dignified and undisturbed composure, except once, when the combined efforts of the alarmed domestics succeeded in turning his activities in the wrong direction. Starting to his feet, he espied a housemaid who chanced to be a newcomer,

and immediately chased her out of the room.

This perverted zeal on the part of the animal, who had at last got it into his head that he was expected to take some measures, led to a series of mishaps. Fred, rushing about to catch the dog, collided with Hannah, who tottered, very nearly fell, and in righting herself threw down the cook. This caught the attention of the bewildered beast, and eluding Fred, he flew toward the prostrate figure, believing that here was an opportunity to distinguish himself. Happily he recognized this new adversary in time as one to whom he was indebted for sundry savory morsels, and he paused, playfully wagging his tail beside her. Quite misunderstanding her groans and exclamations, he supposed that she was prepared to engage in a gambol over the floor. By good fortune the cook was uninjured and did not bear malice, though she addressed a few sharp words of remonstrance to Hannah:

“You big omadhaun of a woman! Can’t you look where you’re going?”

While Mike indulged in a hearty and unrestrained guffaw, Fred and Harry were engaged in an unequal struggle to suppress

their laughter. They politely raised the cook to her feet and strove to reassure the frightened housemaid. The latter declined to re-enter the apartment while that "savage beast" remained there, but hovered about the door, afraid to remain alone in any other portion of the house. The "savage beast," however, convinced that he had done his duty in creating a disturbance, as appeared to be the popular will, lay down again upon his hearth-rug and went to sleep.

With the morning light, however, the nocturnal tremors and anxieties came to an end, and their recurrence was prevented by a discovery made by the boys. This was while overhauling their catch of the preceding day and choosing a couple of fish for breakfast. Attached to the side of each basket from which the fish had been abstracted on the previous night, was a bill, a good, old familiar greenback, United States currency, and a line explaining that it was in payment for what had been taken. The astonishment of the finders may be more readily imagined than described, and the news of this strange occurrence flew about the village like wildfire and gave rise to every sort of conjecture.

CHAPTER IV

A MUNIFICENT GIFT

THE village was allowed to settle down into its jog-trot for a full fortnight after that, until autumn was beginning to steal a march upon summer. There were hints of decay in the woods, a touch of melancholy in the deeper tints of the sky, and a dull, russet brown was fast replacing the green of the wayside grasses.

One morning the Tremaine boys went over to the station to see their uncle off and to witness the arrival of the morning train from the city. After it had come in puffing and steaming, the brothers interested themselves in the various arrivals and in the express, which was unloaded by a couple of busy porters. Amongst the collection of boxes and barrels, they discovered a large case addressed to Father McNeirny and stopped at the rectory on the way home to inform him of the circumstance. There they encountered Paddy Wallace, who had just brought a load of gravel for the garden

path. His cart being now empty, he offered to go out at once and get the box, and Fred volunteered to accompany him. Father McNeirny could not form the slightest idea of what the case contained. He had ordered nothing and expected nothing. Harry Tremaine remained behind at the rectory with his clerical friend, who was much amused at the boy's eager curiosity and ill-restrained impatience.

"We'll see; we'll see presently," he said, "have patience, old fellow. I never knew you to be so fidgety before. Take up a book and read a chapter. It's the best way to pass the time."

"I couldn't fix my thoughts upon it," confessed Harry, "it's no use trying."

"Well, sit down here at the table and help me to count the Sunday collection."

"All right, Father," agreed Harry, glad of an occupation.

"Put the pennies into piles by themselves," directed the priest, "and I'll take the silver. I won't be very long counting *that*."

After the first few busy moments, during

which he ranged the copper coins in rows preparatory to counting them, the boy remarked:

"It doesn't seem to be a very big collection."

"No," said Father McNeirny, with a sigh, which he adroitly changed into a laugh, "but it's magnificent compared to what it will be when you summer birds have flown."

He leaned back in his chair and regarded the money thoughtfully.

"It isn't that I'm avaricious, Harry," he declared, "there never was a man that cared less for money than I do, but there's the interest on the debt coming due in November, and the insurance next month and a lot of other little things. It will take a good many collections pieced together to cover all that and my salary is small."

Harry listened sympathetically, his blue eyes opening wider and wider.

"And then there are so many poor in the parish," went on the priest, becoming unwontedly confidential, "it makes my heart bleed when I see their necessities and can do nothing to relieve them. Sometimes I

wish that I had private means, and then again I say to myself that that wouldn't be God's way at all. He wants the church and the schools and everything else to depend upon His providence. But it would be an immense help if the collections were larger and if everybody that came to church would just give a little."

"I was thinking of those vestments, too," Harry interposed, "that you wished for at the picnic."

"Oh, that was an idle dream; forget all about it," cried the priest, "it was only my foolish vanity, wanting to have things fine when the bishop comes. But he knows I'm only a poor country priest, and he'll have to say Mass in the vestments I've got."

"I wish *our* people were back," cried Harry, impulsively.

"Even if they were, I'd forbid you to say a word to them," responded the priest, "when your father has all but built this church, and it's nothing with him and your mother but give, give, give, ever since I came to the parish. Hello, though, isn't that the sound of wheels?"

For sole answer Harry sprang up and vaulted out of the low window, calling in again immediately:

"It's Paddy and Fred and they've got the box. Come out quick, Father, and see what a big one it is."

Fired by the boy's enthusiasm, Father McNeirny appeared upon the porch just as the cart stopped at the door.

The case was, indeed, so heavy that it was not easy to see how it could be brought into the house.

"There's Ben over in Larkin's field," declared Paddy, and putting his hands trumpet-wise to his mouth, he called:

"Hi, Ben! Hi, Ben!"

Ben did not hear at first. He was busy digging; and it was only after repeated and lusty shouts, wherein the other boys joined, that his attention was attracted. Raising his head, he perceived that three pairs of arms were being waved in his direction, and he also noted the cart at the priest's door, betokening something unusual. Bounding over the intervening fences and clearing the ground in a quick run, he was soon upon

the spot, hearing all the boys together telling him of the arrival of the box and the reason that his services were urgently required.

It was a quiet road whereon the rectory stood. The dwellings were few and irregularly placed and everywhere about were the open fields, the sky line stretching away and mingling with the surrounding sea. So that there were few passers-by, either to observe the unwonted excitement about the rectory, or to assist in the moving of the case. However, by the united exertions of Ben and Father McNeirny, assisted by the Tremaines and Paddy, it was safely deposited in the hall.

"I suppose it would be cruel to keep you in suspense any longer," said Father McNeirny, with a twinkle in his eye, "and I may as well confess that I'm as big a baby as any of you. So run off to the kitchen, Paddy, like a good boy, and get a hammer and chisel from Bridget."

This order was obeyed by Fred instead. He had considerable difficulty in persuading Bridget, who was old and deaf, that he

had not come there for a drink of water. That was the request most frequently made to her, when it was not a case of something to eat, for charity's sake. Therefore, in response to Fred's demand, she produced a large mug and filling it to the brim with water offered it to the discomfited boy. He shook his head and, helpless in the presence of her infirmity, strove by various signs to show her what he meant. Bridget set down the mug with a puzzled look, muttering to herself:

"Poor young gentleman; he's got a nervous complaint."

Fred made another effort, approaching close to the old woman and thundering in her ear. Despairing of success, he was about to go for Father McNeirny, when he perceived in a rack on the wall the very utensils of which he was in search, and seizing them he fled from the kitchen.

In a few moments afterward the splintering of wood was heard and presently, the cover being removed, the eager hands of the boys began to investigate the contents of the case. Packed with the utmost care,

covered by layer after layer of silk paper, were finally displayed first one complete set of vestments and then another. Not only the white for which the priest had wished, but the black and the green and the red and the purple and finally the gold. These last of cloth of gold, embroidered in rich bullion, were the most beautiful that could be imagined.

Father McNeirny gazed at them with wonder, not unmixed with awe. Pale with excitement he exclaimed:

"They can't be for me, boys. Why, all the money I ever got since I came to the parish wouldn't pay for them."

"Some one must have sent them as a present," suggested Fred.

"But who on earth would think of sending me such a present as that?" objected the priest.

"Perhaps," suggested Harry, in his slow, deliberate fashion, "your wish in the woods that day was overheard."

"That is absurd," said Father McNeirny, "there wasn't a soul anywhere about that could afford such gifts."

"I think I know," ventured Harry again.

"Tell us, then, for my sake," urged the agitated priest.

Harry looked at the other boys, who nodded assent, and lowering his voice, declared confidentially.

"I think, Father, it must be the Man from Nowhere."

"Why, what put that into your head?" inquired the priest, hastily, "did you hear anything?"

"No," answered Harry, "but some strange things have been happening lately, and we're almost sure that he has a hand in them."

"That is pure supposition," objected Father McNeirny, "and why on earth should he send me anything?"

"He said you were so kind to him and that he owed you a debt."

"Owed me a debt," repeated the priest, still bewildered and gazing at the mysterious vestments, "owed me a debt!"

As he spoke, two big tears gathered in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He thought of the long years of his ministry,

of the vigils he had kept, his tireless ministrations to the rich and to the poor, late and early, in sunshine and in rain, few of which had ever been requited by so much as a grateful word; and here was this stranger, this Samaritan, if the boy's surmise proved correct, who so gratefully remembered, so bountifully repaid.

It was not that he rated his labors so very highly, for he was singularly humble, and he was constantly afraid that they might fall short of what was required in a priest. Nevertheless, he had a warm, human heart, and its pulses were deeply stirred by this generous appreciation. He had, in fact, very little doubt that Harry spoke the truth, and that this splendid gift had really come from one whom he had regarded as a forlorn waif. Still he advanced another objection:

"We are not even sure, boys, that the man you mention is alive. I have had grave fears ever since his disappearance that something might have happened."

"And lots of folks think he was a sperrit, anny way," put in Paddy.

Father McNeirny's hearty laugh at that suggestion broke the nervous tension.

"Oh, he was flesh and blood all right," he declared.

"And," added Fred, "he must have been a rich man."

"Powerful rich, I guess!" agreed Ben, looking at the vestments.

"And," whispered Harry, looking cautiously around him, "he must be somewhere near, unless ——"

"Unless, he's a sperrit, after all," said Father McNeirny, "and if that was so, I wonder how he managed to be up in that big place in Barclay Street giving orders for vestments."

CHAPTER V

GIFT FOLLOWS GIFT

THE excitement produced by this last and most astounding matter of the vestments, which necessarily became known at once and was proclaimed next Sunday from the pulpit by the pastor himself, was not allowed to die away, but was followed by a

series of other surprises. The good genius that seemed to preside over the affairs of that district continued to distribute his favors. Thus every man who had served in the crew of the life-boat was called upon to appear at the wicket of the post-office to sign for a registered letter, and it is easy to see what a turmoil was produced by that very circumstance in the minds of men who had never received such a document before.

In each separate envelope was enclosed a check for two hundred and fifty dollars, a veritable fortune to these unsophisticated dwellers by the sea. Nor were the Tremaine boys, who had offered the hospitality of their house and carriage, forgotten, nor yet Ben, who had served upon the life-boat, nor Paddy Wallace, who had shared the long night vigil, nor Hannah the house-keeper. Fred became the proud possessor of a tool-chest, and Harry of an exquisitely wrought stem-winder of solid gold bearing the inscription: "To the boy who believed in me." Ben, in addition to the sum received for his work in the life-boat, received a complete set of fishing tackle, and Paddy was

the recipient of the sum of fifty dollars to be absolutely his own. Thus were fulfilled in their regard, to their astonishment and even awe, the exact wishes which they had made in the woods on the memorable day of the picnic. Hannah was delighted with the gift of a handsome silk dress and a sum of money to divide among her fellow-domestics.

The village being thus set by the ears, it seemed as if the climax had been reached. The bishop came and officiated on the September feast, and wore that splendid gold cope, which he declared was almost handsomer than anything that his own ecclesiastical wardrobe contained. Fred and Harry and Paddy were among those within the sanctuary rail, and they felt a certain proud proprietorship in the splendor of those garments.

It was, in fact, a gala occasion. The church was thronged to the doors, not only with the parishioners and the scattered remnants of the summer visitors, but with as many outsiders as could possibly find places. Those of every creed and of none, were eager to see the first public display of

the handsomest of all those priestly garments, which had assumed a more than parochial importance. They had given a new importance to the municipality, and had an almost mythical and fabulous value, as if they were a supernatural gift. The most bigoted of outsiders talked of them with singular gratification and genuine admiration.

While the popular mind was thus at fever heat, the zenith of excitement was reached. At a meeting of the Town Council, on the very day following the ceremony at the church, the local attorney entered fairly bursting with importance. The council met in circumscribed and ill-lighted quarters, consisting of a disused and sadly dilapidated shop. Hence, some idea of their feelings, individually and collectively, may be imagined when the attorney, controlling his voice, and subduing his excitement to the proper professional calm, declared that he desired to read a letter, just received from a legal firm in New York. They had been empowered by a client to purchase, in the village thereafter named, a suitable site for the erection

of a town hall, library, and lyceum. So astounding was this communication that the village functionaries fairly gasped. They were not accustomed to emergencies, the affairs which they had to transact being few and simple. They questioned, they hummed and hawed, they were literally afraid to accept the evidence of their own good fortune.

Nevertheless the fact remained that some one whose name was obviously withheld desired to present the village with a munificent gift. And this fact resisted the most searching inquiries and remained a true one, as was proven by the purchase of several acres of land, whereon were laid the foundations of the new edifice.

The four inseparables were greatly excited over this latest development, and in their secret conclaves were disposed to take a certain share of the credit to themselves. For had they not discovered and, as it were, introduced upon the scene, that mysterious stranger, to whom, rightly or wrongly, they attributed the several benefactions? They loudly proclaimed this belief and sang the

praises of the unknown benefactor. He, whom the sea had, as it were, thrown upon the shore, became a popular hero, or a tutelary genius to all that vicinity. Nor were the superstitious ideas concerning him entirely dispelled. Many others besides Paddy Wallace were still inclined to think of him as a "sperrit." They made no attempt, it is true, to explain why this aerial creation of their fancy should have come up from the sea depths, whither he had presumably returned. Their gossip concerning him beguiled many a solitary evening in the houses of the poorer folk and lent a touch of poetry to rude surroundings. It seemed a part of those strange whisperings, heard in the moaning of the wind over wastes of ocean and the beating of the surges on lonely and night-enshrouded shores.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

OVERTAKEN BY THE STORM

Now the mystery might for many a long day have remained a mystery still, had not Fred and Harry, in the redoubled activity which marked the closing days of their already prolonged vacation, pushed their explorations upon the sandy shore of the ocean farther than ever before.

Two or three days of rain had dampened the exuberance of their spirits, though it had not sufficed to keep them indoors. Provided with raincoats and rubber boots, they had plowed through the muddiest roads and defied the most drenching showers. They had braved even the dreariness of the beach, where the heavy rain made innumerable tiny holes in the dull, gray sand and white-capped waves gleamed ghastly under a sullen sky.

On the fourth morning, the sun showed its welcome visage through the heavy clouds and seemed the brighter for the

previous grayness. It is true that the wise-acres shook their heads over the weather, which they regarded as by no means settled. But the time was growing short for the Tremaine boys and they determined to turn every moment to advantage. Taking an early dinner at noon, they set out with Paddy and Ben, who chanced to be at leisure that day, for the distant regions of the farther beach.

They plodded on valiantly, though the sand was not nearly so firm or smooth as usual after the rain, and their feet were inclined to sink at every step. Harry suddenly remarked:

"This reminds me of that morning when we were building the tunnel, and the Man from Nowhere came up out of the sea."

"Cricky!" cried Paddy, casting a frightened glance over his shoulder, "don't you be talkin' like that. I guess he can hear."

"Hear?" scoffed Fred, "why, what are you thinking of? Just look around you."

They all stood still and gazed at the great, wide ocean and the expanse of sky. The village with its dwellings had disappeared; there was no sign of a living habitation, and

only the dull boom of the surf broke the stillness. After that the boys began to run in pure enjoyment, running races with each other, over the firm, white beach, or leaping over the dunes or low sand-hills, amidst which sprung up the sparse sea-grasses; or, close to the water, they picked up the bubbles of seaweed to crackle them in their fingers, or stored away in their pockets the prettiest of shells and pebbles.

As the scene grew wilder and lonelier and, to the city boys, at least, more unfamiliar, their spirits rose higher and higher. They danced, they whooped, they shouted for very glee or rolled in the sand like young animals. Upspringing again they pursued their way, still farther and farther from every sign of civilization. The keen salt air, blowing landward, caused their cheeks to glow, while the invigorating breath of old ocean likewise expanded their lungs and stimulated their whole system, till they felt that they could have performed the most impossible feats or continued walking on forever.

So absorbed were they in these various delights, afforded by the proximity of the

sea and the sense of boundless freedom, that even Ben and Paddy, who were experienced in such things, did not observe the signs of the weather. At starting, the sky had been a bright blue, flecked with white and showing patches of gray here and there, through which the sun shone down with almost unearthly brightness. Gradually, dark clouds, small at first, began to appear in the western sky, the light became ominously lurid, while the wind moaned dismally, and the sea-birds flew so low that it almost seemed as if their pinions would touch the water. Ben was the first to notice these tokens.

"Look here, fellows!" he cried, in his slow, heavy fashion, "we'd better be turning toward the village."

"Oh, no!" cried Fred, "we want to go another mile at least."

"We'll be lucky ef we git back now before the storm breaks," Ben answered, gravely, "and a regular sou'wester, too, when it do come."

"You bet!" agreed Paddy, looking at the sky, "we'd better make tracks."

Fred was particularly sorry to give up

his project of walking to the end of the beach. Harry, however, though he was likewise disappointed, resigned himself more easily to the inevitable, and seizing his reluctant brother by the arm, turned him back.

"Come," he cried, "don't be a goose!"

"It won't be any use," grumbled Fred, "we're so far away from the village that we might as well go on."

Even while he argued, the clouds began to extend with alarming rapidity. An ominous, appalling darkness overspread the sky, enlivened only by a lurid, yellow light, which quivered weirdly over the sea. The waves, already agitated by the wind that began to blow in short, sharp gusts, broke with redoubled fury or gleamed ghastly pale and gray in the semi-darkness. The boys looked hopelessly around them, only the vast sea-plain and the wide stretch of beach met their eyes, as lonely, dreary, and desolate a scene as could well be imagined, while the first jagged streak of forked lightning lit up the western sky and sharply defined the ragged edge of the black cloud.

Heavy drops of rain began to fall and the rumbling of thunder, though still distant, showed the proximity of the storm.

"We'd best cut and run for it," suggested Paddy.

"Too late," declared Ben, "I guess we'd do better to lie low among the sand-heaps there. That's about the best shelter we can git."

But it was not very much shelter, as they presently found; still, it was better than nothing, better than attempting to run in the teeth of a hurricane of wind and the fierce glare of the lightning, followed by tremendous crashes of thunder. Ben, with the philosophy of his calling, for he was chiefly a fisherman, made out the best shelter he could for himself and his companions in the shadow of the hills. Nevertheless, a more miserable, chilled, drenched, and altogether uncomfortable party of boys than those four it would be impossible to find. They strove to put as brave a face upon affairs as possible and not to mind the terrific peals of thunder and the deadly gleam of the lightning, which might have appalled

the stoutest hearts, while the rain poured down in blinding sheets. They had to look forward, moreover, to an interminably long homeward walk.

Suddenly, to their utter amazement, they heard a voice calling, and looking up cautiously from behind the hill, they perceived a figure advancing, which seemed in the lurid light to be of almost abnormal size. They were considerably startled to discover that it was a huge negro, clad in oilskins and with other garments over his arm. Continuing to approach, he called loudly to the boys, and waved his arms at them; in their alarm and indecision, they kept still and made no answer. Presently, however, in a lull of the storm, they were enabled to distinguish the man's words:

"Come, you boys! Come quick! You git wet dar."

"Come where?" inquired Harry.

"Come with me. Massa tell me to bring you."

The boys exchanged glances. They reflected that four of them together would be tolerably safe, unless there were an organ-

ized band of cutthroats, in which case they would not be safe in their present position. Anything seemed preferable at that moment to the prospect of staying where they were during the gale, and walking home afterward in their dripping garments. Moreover, the spice of adventure appealed to all save, perchance, the timorous Paddy. No sooner had each in turn emerged from the shelter than he was seized by the negro and enveloped in a raincoat. Then the black man, motioning for the others to follow, began to walk away so swiftly that the four companions had all the trouble in the world to keep pace with him.

They were almost blinded by the sand, impelled by the fierce blast, as they proceeded into what seemed to be a veritable wilderness. They fully realized that it would be an impossibility to walk any distance under those conditions. As it was, they hastened on, blindly, helplessly, breathlessly, bewildered by the sense of their awful situation. All at once the beach rounded to a curve, and the boys' wondering and delighted gaze beheld, at a comparatively short

distance inland, a structure of some sort. Its appearance was so unexpected, its isolation so complete, that it might have arisen there by enchantment. They could not determine what kind of dwelling it might be, but with a new hope animating their benumbed faculties they ran more swiftly, and soon reached the grateful shelter.

CHAPTER II

A SINGULAR ABODE

THE apartment wherein they found themselves was large and square, of solid hardwood, and from it opened a couple of smaller rooms. The furniture was of the simplest kind, while guns, fishing tackle, and other implements of sport filled racks upon the wall or lay in careless profusion everywhere. On a rude hearth of the most primitive description burned immense logs of firewood, giving a blaze which seemed to the boys the most cheerful sight that had ever met their eyes.

The negro dropped off his own oilskins, and divested the boys not only of the rain-coats, but also of their wet jackets, which he carefully spread before the fire. He also took off their shoes and stockings, exposing them to the flame. Meanwhile, the olfactory nerves of the guests were greeted by an odor, which even to their bewildered senses seemed familiar and decidedly pleasant. It was with something like awe that Fred whispered to Harry:

“Coffee!”

And coffee it was, boiling up over the fire and filling the room with its delightful fragrance. The negro placed rude seats before the hearth for his charges, who began to be fully conscious of their comfortable surroundings, and to rejoice at their security from the raging tempest. As they sat thus, they were startled by a voice, which they seemed to know. It uttered the few and simple words:

“Jake, pour out the coffee!”

The four boys, by a simultaneous movement, looked over their shoulder, but at the first glance perceived nothing. The negro,

instantly obeying the order, raised a huge pot of coffee from the logs and poured it into mugs which stood ranged upon a table. He offered one of these to each of the guests, supplemented by huge slices of rye bread and butter. Never had anything tasted more delicious, and while they ate and drank they basked in the cheerful warmth, and their troubles, fears, and despondency magically vanished.

Meantime, the gale raged without, terrific waves broke upon the shore, rivaling in their thunder the artillery of heaven overhead. The lightning glared through the window-panes, obscured as they were by the blinding rain. The boys having finished the second helping of coffee, which was supplied to them by the negro, their curiosity began to awaken, and they stared about them with interest. They wondered how a house could have come there in so isolated a position. Ben and Paddy were positive that it had not been there very long and that no one in the village was aware of its existence. All were eager to know who could be the owner of the mysterious dwelling, "the Mas-

sa" to whom the black man had referred, and to whom likewise belonged the voice which they had heard.

Whilst they were pondering thus and gazing about the apartment, a figure suddenly appeared on the threshold of one of the smaller rooms. This apparition caused the four boys simultaneously to start, while Paddy Wallace, turning pale, uttered his favorite exclamation:

"Cricky, it's *him!*"

The personage indicated by that awe-stricken masculine pronoun advanced toward the circle surrounding the hearth. The eyes of every boy were riveted upon him, while Paddy visibly shrank into the farthest corner.

"Well, boys," said the newcomer, in a genial and friendly tone, "I'm sorry I can't offer you just now a meat pie nor yet a salad nor any of those other excellent things with which you regaled me. But what I have is most heartily at your service and, at least, you can find rest and security in this poor abode."

The boys, still speechless with astonish-

ment, continued to regard their singular host. There in very flesh and blood, slim, alert, and cheerful as ever, clad in that self-same suit of dark blue flannel in which they had first seen him, stood the "Man from Nowhere!"

Glancing, with frank amusement at their bewilderment, from one to the other of the boys, the stranger spoke again, partly with a view to relieve the embarrassment of his guests.

"It is something, of course," he said, "to have gained a shelter from the storm, one of the worst I have ever seen upon this coast. It is a fine sight, though; look there!"

He pointed through the window to the western sky, still darkened by storm clouds, piling up in jagged masses, black or violet, which were riven asunder, ever and anon, by streaks of lurid white, or jets of flame. The sea, now gray, now silvery white, was still agitated, and rose and fell in tumultuous masses of brine. The rain continued its drenching downpour. The whole was terrible, sublime, and, to the excited fancy of the boys, almost mystical, as though it

had been some ancient ocean, far off under alien suns and with a strange, foreign sky stretching overhead.

Harry Tremaine, turning presently from the contemplation of this spectacle and breaking the embarrassed silence that had held himself and his companions as in a spell, said to the stranger:

"It was very kind of you, sir, to send your man for us. But how did you know we were out there?"

"Oh, I have various means of knowledge at my command," the man answered, "though I am not quite like our old acquaintance Prospero, in his enchanted isle. My friend Paddy there will probably tell you that I know it all, as befits a 'sperrit.' In this case, however, I assure you that I did not employ any supernatural means to discover your whereabouts."

He laughed that same boyish laugh which his hearers had found so attractive before, as he went on to explain:

"The matter is very simple. My man Jake here was himself caught in the storm, and reported to me that four boys were ex-

actly in the same predicament. I should have tried to help them in any case, but I was the more anxious to do so that I strongly suspected it could be no other than *my* particular four. For I knew that for some time past you contemplated this excursion."

"You knew that?" exclaimed Fred, "well, I never!"

"Oh, yes, I knew that. I have kept myself pretty well informed of your doings, my fine fellows, since that memorable night when you all guarded the silver so faithfully, and with the exception of Harry, were prepared to do battle with a miscreant in a righteous cause."

Fred, Ben, and Paddy looked confused, but the stranger, putting a hand on the shoulder of those two who were nearest to him, said, earnestly:

"Don't for a moment think that I blame you. You were right, yes, a thousand times right, to defend what was in your charge, and you acted bravely and like men. But I was feeling a bit despondent and discouraged just then, and I appreciated the

fact that Harry here recognized me to be an honest man."

"Not quite at first," Harry put in, fearing that he had been receiving unmerited praise.

"No, I understand all that," cried the stranger hastily, "don't spoil my illusions."

The silence which ensued was again broken by Harry, saying with conviction:

"It was *you* that sent all the presents."

The mysterious personage regarded the speaker, a smile playing about his lips, but said nothing.

"Oh, thank you so much for the watch," Harry cried.

"And those splendid tools," echoed Fred.

"And the money," put in Paddy somewhat timidly, "I guess I hain't never had as much in my life."

"And I will say, mister," Ben added, "that I ain't ever used sech fishin' tackle."

"Then," concluded Harry, "there were the splendid vestments and the town hall."

The stranger put his hands to his ears, with a comical expression of dismay, while the boy continued, warmly:

“Everybody in the village is grateful to you.”

“My dear boys,” cried the man thus addressed, and he spoke with an emotion that brought tears to the eyes of all, “how can you, how can any one talk of gratitude to me, when I think of the debt I owe. To yourselves, who received me into your house and watched with me during a long night; to the village, that took me to the hospitable warmth of mother earth after the terrors of the sea; and to the brave men who risked their lives to snatch me out of deadly peril.”

He turned away, as if overcome by his emotion, then resumed in his ordinary tone:

“I am an idle fellow. I chance to have some money at my command. The very little I have done has given me great pleasure, but I hope that I shall be able to do much more to show my appreciation.”

Then he resolutely changed the subject, sitting down amongst the boys as if he had been one of themselves, inquiring as to their interests and pursuits, their daily doings and the happenings of village life. He spoke with cordial affection of Father McNeirny:

"That is a man whom I admire!" he declared, emphatically. "Some of these days I am going to let him take me in hand and transform me into a Christian—if he can. And you boys will have a share in the work. You taught me a thing or two about what it is to believe in God and to act accordingly."

The boys were astonished at this idea. How could they teach any one? They were such ordinary, everyday fellows, as they thought, and scarcely ever dreamed of talking religion.

"It's the best thing in the world even for this existence here below," continued the unknown, earnestly, "to be brought up with religion all around and about you. If you stick fast to its teachings, you'll never meet with shipwreck. I don't want to preach, heaven knows, but, oh, my dear fellows, hold to your belief and practice it, if you want to be happy men."

The deep and almost tragic solemnity and the evident sincerity with which the stranger spoke impressed his hearers. Jake, the negro, a picturesque figure, sat, mean-

while, in the background, listening eagerly to the conversation which his master pursued as if oblivious of his presence. Later on, however, when the talk had assumed a lighter tone and was interlarded with jest and laughter, Jake occasionally showed his white teeth in an appreciative grin. And thus the shadows of the afternoon gathered darker and darker, till the twilight had fallen on that unusual scene and on the group at the fireside. Gradually the thunder had rumbled away into the distance and the jagged streaks of the forked lightning had ceased to illumine the sky.

Then it was that Ben Masterson, who had been observing the scenes of the weather, said suddenly, with an admonitory glance at his companions:

"I guess, mister, we'll have to be goin' now."

"Going?" cried the stranger, "not if I have to prevent you by main force."

"The worst of the storm's over," Ben declared.

"The lightning and thunder, yes," said their host, "but look out there at that

rain. Why, you'd be drenched before you went a quarter of a mile. And as for the wind, it has by no means exhausted itself yet."

He stopped and made the boys listen to the fierce blasts that still swept past the house.

"I think you may as well make up your minds," he urged, "to spend the night under my roof. For you could not reach the village till long after dark, and it might not be very safe to make the attempt."

The boys looked at one another. There was much in the suggestion that was very tempting. The novelty of their situation, its adventurous character, and the pleasant companionship of their hospitable host were in themselves desirable; whereas it seemed unspeakably dreary to think of the interminably long walk over the wastes of sand, in the darkness of the gathering night, and in the face of rain and wind.

"Jake will cook you a beefsteak," continued their entertainer, "won't you, Jake?"

"Yes, Massa."

"And a mighty good one, as I can tell

you beforehand, with some of his fried potatoes and beaten biscuit, 'old Virginia style.'

"Hannah may be anxious," objected Harry, "and Paddy Wallace's aunt, who takes care of him, and Ben's people too."

"Well, their anxiety would be better founded if you took that long walk in such weather," declared the stranger, "we shall let them know as early as possible in the morning that you are safe. They will probably think that you took shelter somewhere."

"I guess they'll know we're all right," put in Ben, for he better understood by experience the difficulties that the homeward walk would entail, "as long as we was on dry land, they won't be scared."

So it was settled.

CHAPTER III

A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE

THAT was a memorable night for our four acquaintances. Jake fully realized their expectations in the matter of cooking. They all enthusiastically declared that it

was superfine. And when they had done the fullest justice to the viands, they resumed their places about the fire for a long and confidential talk.

Jake busied himself in preparing rude but comfortable couches, ranged against the wall, somewhat in the manner of sailors' bunks, with warm blankets and soft pillows. This done, he withdrew, and the little group of personages who had been thus strangely brought into one another's lives sat together, while a clock upon the wall ticked away the hours, just as another clock had done upon that other night at the Tremaine villa.

In the course of conversation, the stranger gave them a partial insight into some of the mysteries which had made that summer a thing apart in the history of the village and in the experience of all these boys.

"I came here," said the stranger, "and caused this shack to be built, in order that I might find solitude. For that reason, too, I kept my presence here, as far as possible, a secret, and for that reason I started upon the cruise which so nearly ended dis-

astrously. My special motives for that course of action would not interest you. Suffice it to say that I was sick of life and utterly weary. I sought under the sky of heaven peace and freedom from the companionship of my fellow-men, which had become unendurable."

"And we came here and found you out," exclaimed Harry, regretfully, "wasn't that a pity!"

"No," said the stranger, "the sea first threw me into your path, and as for the rest, you broke in upon a morbidly selfish retirement. Even in my worst of moods I did not intend that this isolation should last forever."

He laughed genially as he spoke. "Ever since I so narrowly escaped from the clutches of the ocean monsters, I have had a new interest in existence. I have felt impelled to cultivate a closer acquaintance with you four, for example, and, as I have said, to put myself into the hands of Father Mc-Neirny."

He stopped and looked into the fire seriously for some moments, then resumed:

"That mysterious rite of which you told me, your short and simple explanation of the tremendous power wielded by that kindly, human-hearted priest, struck me as so wonderful that it has haunted my solitude ever since and filled me with a strange longing. Oh, boys, boys! You to whom these things have been commonplaces since your childhood can not know, can not understand!"

His voice was broken, as it were, with emotion and his listeners gazed at him with something like awe, but he presently continued in his ordinary voice:

"Perhaps you did not know that I met Father McNeirny upon the beach and had a talk with him that morning when I so ungraciously left the hospitable shelter of your house."

He turned to Harry and Fred as he concluded: "When he left me, with his frank and hearty handshake, we were friends forever. After he had passed out of sight and I still stood there, my faithful Jake came hurrying to the shore. He had been in the greatest distress of mind, for he had discov-

ered that I was upon the ocean and had probably heard tidings of the overturned boat."

"Oh, he must have been glad to find you again!" cried Fred and Harry in unison.

"Yes, he was glad, indeed, and when I saw him the longing came upon me to slip away and bury myself in seclusion without revealing my identity. As to the minor mysteries ——"

"The basket for the crabbers," suggested Fred.

The stranger smiled and nodded good-humoredly.

"And the day of the picnic, when you—or some one—must have found the list or heard the wishes," added Harry.

"Yes, and the day when your fish was taken," assented the host. "Jake and I know something about all those matters. The explanation is very simple and they are such trifles as to be scarcely worth discussing."

"We thought you was a sperrit or one of those old fairies," put in Paddy, timorously, not altogether reassured as yet upon

either point. The man laughed long and loudly at the suggestion, and promptly changed the subject. Harry asked him after a while:

“Are you going to stay here in winter, sir?”

“No, I think that would be scarcely possible, with the flood-tides and all that, but I shall stay as long as I can. So I wonder if I can trust you all to keep my secret for a time from every one except Father Mc-Neirny?”

The boys readily promised; though, of course, this quite spoiled the sensation which they had hoped to make on their return to the village. After that, the host advised them to go to bed, as one after another the lads began to show signs of fatigue. He saw them all settled on their temporary couches, and warmly covered up, while still the wind in fierce gusts swept by that lonely dwelling and the noise of the rain upon the roof sounded portentously loud. When bidding them good night and promising to have them wakened very early for their return homeward, the stranger said:

“Be assured, boys, that some time you will hear of me again, when we shall have a more intimate acquaintance and you shall learn, perhaps, the whole story of the Man from Nowhere.”

CHAPTER IV

FURTHER MYSTERY

THE boys went away to college again with the mystery unsolved. They felt a delicacy in intruding themselves any further upon the stranger without an invitation, which was not forthcoming. It was to their credit that the four, solemnly pledging themselves to secrecy, uttered no word concerning the singular dwelling upon the beach, nor of their adventures there. Of course, they made the one exception, which the stranger himself had suggested, and related the whole occurrence to Father McNeirny. The priest looked thoughtful as he listened to the tale, but agreed with the boys that it was better to take no further step, leaving

the matter altogether to the unknown one's good pleasure.

"We must leave the affair in higher hands," he declared, "we'll have to pray for him, boys, and, please God, he'll be brought one day into the true fold."

This the boys, and especially the Tremaines, pledged themselves to do and were faithful to their promise, even after they had returned to college. Father McNeirny never advocated long prayers, but he asked them to say a decade of the Rosary or a few Hail Marys now and again for that waif of the ocean who had so singularly drifted into their lives.

After the Tremaines left the village and their dwelling was closed, together with most of the other summer residences, Ben and Paddy often talked, after their own fashion, of the events of the summer and promised to keep their friends acquainted with any new developments that might occur. When November was settling down gray and dreary, fogs rolling up from the sea and nightly frosts chilling the warm surface of the land, Ben and Paddy, on one occasion,

pursued their investigations as far as the scene of their nocturnal adventures. It was Paddy who had suggested in a shamefaced sort of way that they should try to find the place again, and observe it from a safe distance and find out, if they could, how it fared with the "Man from Nowhere." Ben had received the suggestion in silence, sitting down to ruminate after his fashion, and finally deciding that the attempt might be made.

"But we've got to keep out o' that feller's sight," he declared, "jest recollect that."

Paddy quite willingly agreed to that part of the bargain, since he never felt altogether comfortable in the stranger's presence. When they drew near the memorable spot, therefore, they crouched behind sand-dunes, resting a full five minutes behind the very hill where they had taken shelter and from which Jake had rescued them. By various signs, perceptible to Ben's trained eye, they were able to locate from that vantage-point the position of the house. They knew it to be immediately beyond the rounding of that curve in the beach, and at but a little dis-

tance inland. They cautiously reconnoitered before turning the curve, from which they gradually drew near the fateful spot. As they approached, their feelings were a compound of surprise, relief, and disappointment. Not a trace of the shack was to be seen. The flood-tides of the autumn had removed almost every vestige of the dwelling. Only a very few traces remained to prevent the explorers from believing that their experience had been all a dream. The Man from Nowhere had likewise disappeared and had gone to the place from which he had come. To Paddy's superstitious mind, this place was undoubtedly in the depths of the sea.

His old fears revived. He was anxious to get away from the spot. It was dreary enough as they stood, Ben gazing out over the deep, with that gaze, half wistful, half penetrating, with which fishermen or mariners so often seem to regard their familiar element, and Paddy casting timorous glances on the spot where so lately they had seen the magical dwelling. A bitter wind blew, moaning and whistling, direct from

the main, and a cold sea mist crept up, as if it would obliterate the last traces of the boys' adventure and the stranger's sojourn on those shores. The waves of the incoming tide licked the beach, slowly, silently, but irresistibly, as a destructive influence might creep into a life. The lads shivered, and Ben, turning up the collar of his pilot coat—a movement which Paddy imitated, as far as the limitations of his jacket would permit—said with a sigh:

“We'd best be movin,' Paddy, if we don't want the dark to ketch us here.”

They moved homeward in disconsolate silence, and next morning Ben wrote a few scrawling, ill-spelled lines to Harry Tremaine.

“Thar's nary a thing left. That thar shack with its fixins, and the nigger and *him*, they've clean vamoosed.”

To which Paddy added a postscript:

“I guess he's gone back into the sea.”

And this communication awoke within the Tremaine boys the old fire of interest and curiosity, which had begun to burn lower amid the varied happenings of college

life. It gave them a subject to discuss when they found a quiet half-hour together upon the campus.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

IT WAS midsummer again, and the Tremaine boys were once more at the villa, where their parents were likewise ensconced. The two boys took up their old friendship with Ben and Paddy, despite the facts that both had grown taller and had begun to be particular about the shape of their collars and the pattern of their neckties. Of course, a bond of union between them was still the waif rescued from the sea, and the adventures wherein he was concerned, that they had had in common. It formed a chief topic of conversation in their meetings, and something was almost sure to crop up about the mysterious stranger, whether these meetings were held under the umbrella-tree, where a surprise had greeted the crabbers; in the woods, now luxuriantly green as of old, and

emitting the same fragrant and resinous odors, where the picnic had been disturbed by unaccountable noises; or on the beach, where the upturned boat had first attracted attention.

But speculate as they might, and discuss the subject from every point of view, there was no further information to be gained, until one eventful day, when Father McNeirny detained Harry a moment in the sacristy, after Mass, which the boy had been serving.

"I want you four," he said, "Ben, Paddy, Fred and yourself, to meet me this afternoon on the beach. It's the best place," he added with a laugh, "for a private talk, especially if a land breeze is blowing, because your words are all blown out to sea. And it would be a good thing, too, if half the words people utter could be blown away, every time. Don't stop now, but let all four of you be there punctually at three o'clock."

Needless to say, they were all assembled at the hour named. Father McNeirny sat silent a few moments, looking toward the sapphire-colored waves as they tumbled and

danced under a blue sky, when he began to speak, and his words were almost drowned by the noise of the breakers.

"Do you remember, lads," he began, "that morning when we stood here and watched a man struggling for life in the breakers out yonder?"

The boys eagerly nodded assent, and Father McNeirny went on.

"The life-boat brought him ashore, and now, I guess, by God's help, we're going to pull him out of a deeper whirlpool."

The eyes glued to the speaker's face grew round with wonder, while the priest added, slowly and deliberately, as though he were choosing his words:

"I have learned at last," he said, "who it was that we saved."

"And is he a real, live man?" interrupted Paddy. At which all laughed, and Father McNeirny answered, laughing:

"Oh, he's alive, all right enough, and he's going to prove the fact, but can any of you guess his name?"

"He called himself the Man from Nowhere," observed Fred.

"That was when he was just drifting back into life," Father McNeirny answered, "you will be surprised when you hear his name."

"Tell us, Father," cried Fred.

"We've waited so long," added Harry.

"Well, he's just the famous multi-millionaire, or billionaire, if you like ——"

And the priest, as if afraid that the very winds would hear him, bent and whispered a name, which the boys repeated in an awe-stricken chorus. They could scarcely have been more amazed had they learned that the stranger was, in truth, a merman from the ocean depths. Even the country boys were familiar with that personage and his doings.

"He has written me his whole history," Father McNeirny continued, "and instructed me to let you know. What I have to tell you first is deeply shocking, especially to our Catholic instincts. Boys, he went out there into those waves with the deliberate purpose of destroying himself."

Exclamations of horror broke from the lads. The Tremaines particularly, in their sturdy and enlightened Catholicity, felt a

loathing of that capital crime, that unpardonable sin, which done deliberately, makes even the mercy of a Redeeming God unavailable.

"One would not have thought him such a coward," said the priest, speaking with deep sadness, as though the idea depressed him. "Even if there were no other world, and no God, who gave His life for men, it is a base and contemptible act, thus to flinch in the battle of life and to fly from its troubles. However, in this case, though my correspondent makes no excuse, it is evident that he was physically and mentally unbalanced by a terrible grief. He had lost his young wife and two children, in the course of a month. Perhaps that was why the mercy of God went out to him in his awful danger."

The boys waited silently, while Father McNeirny continued the story.

"You see, he had no faith, no hope, no love for his Creator, to support him in such a trial, so, eluding his faithful servant, Jake, he, the experienced and skilful yachtsman, who has made voyages half round the globe,

set out alone in a frail craft, which he well knew would bear him to destruction.

“Once out under the pitiless sky, with the waves threatening every moment to engulf him, he realized the rashness of his act, and would have saved himself then had any means of so doing offered. But none was apparent, and the death which he had chosen seemed rushing upon him.”

Father McNeirny stopped an instant, mastering the emotion which the thought occasioned, then he resumed:

“Think of the compassion of Almighty God, guiding him toward our shore and sending our brave fellows to his rescue. His wife, as he declares, had been a Catholic, his children, being baptized in that Faith, went to heaven in their innocence. Perhaps their prayers ascended to the throne of grace. He was saved, as you know, not only from physical death, but from eternal ruin.”

The boys shuddered at the thought and at these terrible revelations, which so deeply impressed their youthful minds.

“Oh,” cried Father McNeirny, “the dis-

honor, the unspeakable horror of that crime, of which we read so calmly in the newspapers. Take the thought to your hearts, boys, that it is the most dreadful calamity that can befall an individual or a family, and that the prevalence of such a crime is a disgrace to any nation. It is a dark, deadly, unnatural sin, which we shall not fully understand until we reach the other world."

After that, according to his wont, Father McNeirny turned his conversation into a lighter vein and the unusual sternness of his face relaxed.

"Well, at any rate," he exclaimed, "thank God that our poor friend was saved from such a fate as that, and do you know, boys, he is coming here to be instructed in the Catholic religion and to be publicly received into the Church. He considers this village as his second birthplace, and he's going to do wonders, I can tell you, for its material, moral, and spiritual improvement. I won't tell you half his plans. They'd take too long, and besides, I'll let him tell you himself. Each one of you boys is to be his

particular charge from this time forth. What pleases me best is the change in his own sentiments. The faith, the contrition, the humble thankfulness of the man, are most edifying."

"I suppose there'll be a splendid celebration at the church the day he's baptized?" surmised Fred.

"To be sure. We'll have the bishop here, and make it a regular holiday."

"I hope it will be in summer," said Harry.

"Oh, yes," answered the priest, "for I do not think he will need much instruction. He has been reading so many Catholic books and conferring with priests and he had learned a good deal about the Church from his wife."

"I'm only sorry for one thing," Harry declared, thoughtfully.

"Out with it!" cried Father McNeirny, "though here doesn't seem much room for sorrow in the whole affair."

"I'm sorry he's so rich," Harry explained, shamefacedly. "I would have liked it better if he had stayed just the same, so that we could feel more at home with him."

Father McNeirny laughed and slapped Harry on the back:

"I felt a little that way myself," he admitted. "I was almost sorry to find out that he was such a very big gun. But afterward, when I reflected on all that he might do for God's glory and on the many causes for thankfulness, I felt ashamed of myself."

Up to this time Ben had said nothing. He could scarcely take in the wondrous facts over which he was pondering in his deliberate fashion. But now he remarked, slowly:

"With all that chink he was real sociable and not a bit stuck up."

"I guess I won't be scared of him any more," said Paddy, "now I know he's living."

There was an accent of doubt in his tone, however, for a multi-millionaire was almost as far removed from his sphere as a "sper-rit."

"Will we see him soon?" inquired Fred.

"Yes, very soon," answered the priest.

"But only for a few days, I suppose," queried Harry.

"He's coming for the whole summer," de-

clared their informant. "He has rented Ashwood House for the rest of the season, and after that he's going to build for himself and live here most of the time."

"Hurrah!" shouted Harry, carried out of himself at last.

"Hurrah!" cried the other boys, sending up cheer after cheer, in which Father McNeirny joined. And these sounds of jubilation were carried upon the land breeze outwards to that distant point from which the life-boat had snatched the shipwrecked man.

"I wish," cried Fred, impetuously, "that it was next week, for then he would be coming!"

"You won't have to wait so long," exclaimed a voice.

And there, emerging from behind a sand-hill, after his mysterious fashion, came the stranger, who for the last time was called by the boys the Man from Nowhere. He looked precisely the same as when they had seen him last, clad in the same well-fitting suit of blue flannel. In another moment he stood, the center of the group, wringing hand after hand in a cordial grasp.

"I'm at home now, Father," he said, "and I've got my family about me. Just yourself and my four boys. I won't be the Man from Nowhere any more, nor coming from the sea-depths, as Paddy thought. For some time to come I'll hail from this village, and I'll see if we can't make things spin pleasantly along."

Then he dropped his lighter tone, and still holding Harry's hand in his, looked out over the sea, with a shudder.

"When I think of it, Father," he murmured, "I don't know what to say."

"There's only one thing to be said," answered the priest, smiling through his tears, "and that's 'Thank God.'"

"Let us all kneel down and say it together," the stranger suggested, half apologetically. For prayer was still new to him.

But neither the boys nor their clerical friend and mentor found anything singular in the proceeding. So down they all knelt, almost upon the spot where the boys had constructed their tunnel, which, like so many human plans, had been long since ruthlessly swept away. And thus kneeling they offered

up a short but fervent thanksgiving, voiced by Father McNeirny, in which the stranger joined in accents choked by sobs. After they had arisen from their knees, he said, in his ordinary, cheerful tone:

“In thanking God for everything else, boys, I must be grateful to Him that I’m no longer the Man from Nowhere.”

THE END

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